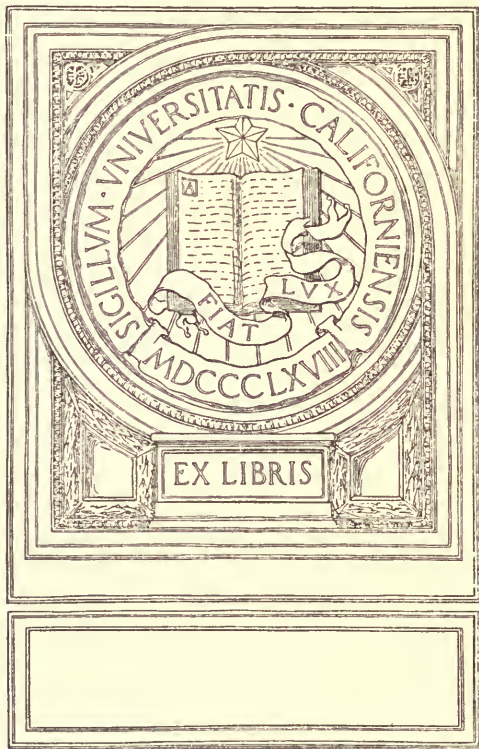


MISS SYLVESTER'S
MARRIAGE
BY
CECIL CHARLES

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
AT LOS ANGELES



MISS SYLVESTER'S MARRIAGE





"She was able to speak composedly. 'I have not yet been able to thank you . . .'"

MISS SYLVESTER'S MARRIAGE

By Cecil Charles

Illustrated by W. Sherman Potts



1903

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Preface

To commit to paper the absolute verities of life is seemingly the simplest task of the novelist, yet it is the most difficult he could set out to perform. It is an ancient fact that truth is indeed stranger than fiction, and the more closely a writer adheres to the very kernel of truth, the less likely is his story to be believed. His work no doubt should be illuminated with some spark of his imagination, lest it be considered too dark a picture he paints. If the following pages seem too photographic, the fault is hardly that of the author, for the endeavor has been made to reveal this picture of a phase in a girl's life in a perfectly clear manner. Perhaps the figures in the little drama may seem too sharply drawn; yet the writer believes that the intelligent reader will understand how the events recorded could actually have occurred, and how possible, even probable, it is that similar events may take place again.

July, 1903.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A MEETING.....	15
II. SPANISH BLOOD.....	29
III. ALMA IS SURPRISED.....	41
IV. DA VEIGA CALLS.....	53
V. IN THE PARK.....	63
VI. MISS SYLVESTER DISAPPEARS.....	75
VII. LIFE AND ILLUSIONS	83
VIII. MORE ILLUSIONS.....	91
IX. A DAY OF REFLECTION.....	101
X. A MYSTERIOUS NOTE.....	109
XI. STRANGE REVELATIONS.....	121
XII. A NIGHT OF TRIAL.....	135
XIII. ALMA CONFRONTS HER HUSBAND.....	145
XIV. A TALK WITH MR. TRAVIS.. ..	153
XV. "DIABLO!".....	161
XVI. A PARTY OF SEVEN.....	169
XVII. OVER THE CURAÇOA....	175
XVIII. ALMA LISTENS... ..	185

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX. HOME AGAIN.....	193
XX. EXPLANATIONS.....	203
XXI. MRS. SEVENBANKS RETURNS.....	213
XXII. SEÑOR VASQUEZ.....	221
XXIII. THE RECONCILIATION.....	227
XXIV. ON THE TRAIN.....	237
XXV. A DESPERATE STRUGGLE.....	245
XXVI. A FINAL WORD.....	251

"Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last—far off—at last. . . ."

TENNYSON—*In Memoriam.*

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

CHAPTER I

A MEETING

THE innumerable tucks in the sleeves of her chiffon bodice appeared to fascinate the dark foreigner ; he bent over her constantly. The music went on vaguely, murmurously, and the chiffon seemed to float in time to its rhythm. She was an uncommon figure, with an airiness and grace altogether charming. Her throat and neck were smooth and delicate, but not fragile ; her arms were beyond criticism ; her skin had a satiny gloss, striking in contrast with her black hair and dark eyes ; her eyebrows were straight and her lashes long and fine ; her nose was as perfect as Psyche's and her mouth tropical.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Her gown was yellow, and she wore a pearl or two, being a young lady of taste as well as a niece of Mrs. Sevenbanks and a daughter of the late Francis Sylvester, Esq.

The foreigner was not the only one susceptible to the influence of her chiffon aura ; a couple of average young dancing men, dallying in the doorway, exchanged consoling confidences.

"Nerve? Well, rather. Not the girl's fault. Where is the old lady?"

"The old lady has got hold of old Clifford. Awfully good sort of chaperon ! But who is the freak, you know ? Has a Philippine sort of look. One never knows what to expect in this house."

"Clayton affects oddities because he thinks it English form. He will keep on as long as he dares. When he goes too far people will show him they are bored, and he will have to—" he paused, glancing over his shoulder.

The voice that made him pause was perfect in modulation. "The poor child finds it dull. Stepping from the carriage she turned

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

her ankle. I wanted to drive back at once, but she insisted it was nothing. Of course she is not dancing."

The young men receded from the doorway with grace. Mrs. Sevenbanks was non-irritant, non-astringent; her gowns moderate, her diamonds small and her bloneness never florid. Her delicate encouragement of Clifford, the well-preserved old bachelor Assembly authority, was like fine gauze against the firm neutrality of her nine-year-old half-mourning. She was never anything less than that cool, calm, considerate creation of circumstance known dimly to the *polloi*, without the pale, as the society leader. She had a smile for the receding young men, and then her gaze fell on Miss Sylvester and the ponderous individual of dark complexion.

She put up her glass for an instant and put it down again. There was no movement of her brows as she spoke in a low tone, "Alma!" But the girl heard and rose. With a little catch of breath she said, "I must go to my aunt. It has been pleasant to hear you speak of my native land."

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Then she moved forward slowly, as if walking hurt her.

The man did not follow; he stood looking after her with intent black eyes, like one unaccustomed to ball-rooms and unsure of what he should do.

Mrs. Sevenbanks paid no attention to him, but spoke to her niece: "You are looking pale. I think I should take you home."

"Very well," said Miss Sylvester, "I am quite ready."

As she passed through the doorway she turned and glanced back at her late companion, who replied to this attention with a very low bow, his hand on his heart. The bending of his body in this particular manner had something grotesque in it. Mrs. Sevenbanks made no allusion to him until her old friend Clifford had placed them in a carriage and they were being driven home. Then, pleasantly enough, she inquired: "And who was that peculiar person, Alma, with whom you were talking?"

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"It was a South American gentleman, Aunt Louise."

"A gentleman? I thought he hardly knew how to act. I fancied . . . these—detectives, you know. Still, it was not such a crush. . . . What a remarkable way of bowing! I should call him an amusing character. I wonder how he came to be at the dance."

"I suppose they asked him." The girl spoke half-pettishly. "He has not amused me at all. He has made me sad—and sick of this country."

"You surprise me—though I suppose I ought not to be surprised, for I have heard you say something of the kind before. If you longed for Paris or London . . . but to leave civilization and go down there among the savages——"

"You forget, Aunt Louise, that I was born down there among the savages."

"Oh, no, I do not forget that. But you were educated for the most part in the United States, and after all, you are an American."

"Anyway," said Miss Sylvester, "I hate

Miss Spibester's Marriage

New York! I can't breathe in it—there's something stifling!" She threw herself forward and held her face to the open window of the carriage. Stars were faintly visible in the sky where it was clear of clouds. It was a still night early in April; there was no breeze. In a moment, as if impatient of their slow progress homeward, she fell back against the cushions.

"Does your ankle pain you very much?" her aunt inquired, kindly. "I am sorry I did not insist on going home sooner. It should have been bathed at once with arnica."

"I had almost forgotten it," said the girl. "General"—she pronounced it with the Spanish g—"da Veigh was telling me stories of fearful wars."

"Hennyrrall? is that a Christian name?" Mrs. Sevenbanks was not an intentional aggravator, but she had a way of ignoring anything South American—even a Spanish pronunciation.

"It is a military title," Alma explained, languidly, though with no tone of disrespect.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"Something higher than colonel. He is an exile now."

"You refer to that very dark, very large man?" Mrs. Sevenbanks persisted. "He is not—of another race, then?"

"I did not ask him if he was of another race," said Miss Sylvester, closing her eyes.

The carriage had turned into an avenue and rolled more easily on asphalt. It was less of an effort to converse, and Mrs. Sevenbanks still had something to say. "You are not asleep, Alma?"

"No."

"To-morrow, when your Aunt Ester Harding arrives—it is to-morrow she comes, I think?"

"Yes, it is to-morrow. If she comes in the morning I shall probably be out. I have promised Alice Dow to go out with her. But then Aunt Ester may want a little chat with you."

The carriage had stopped. Mrs. Sevenbanks uttered a sound like a very faint sigh as they went up the steps and were admitted by the automatic servant. "There is rather

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

a bright light," she said. "I think your Aunt Ester may have already arrived."

Back where the severity of the drawing-room melted into artistic corners and a five-o'clock-tea nook the lights were certainly brilliant. The tea-table was drawn up by the side of the widest and most comfortable chair, in which reposed a lady, her tremendously arched Spanish feet in their tremendously high-heeled boots resting on the handsomest and costliest cushion she had been able to find in the room. As Mrs. Sevenbanks and Alma came in, domino-like in their shimmering opera cloaks, she sprang up with a cry like a child's: "I am here, you see; they wanted to send me to bed, but I wouldn't go. I ordered coffee, being half-dead. I came direct from Chicago—the porter of the sleeping-car stole my opals—to-morrow I shall enter complaint—and to-morrow I shall have my face steamed and a Turkish bath. Till then I represent Chicago."

"You are looking well," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, embracing her mildly and at

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

once giving place to Alma. "I am glad we returned early. You were very right to order coffee, but I fear it may keep you awake. I know how it would affect me." She smiled, glanced at the black lees in the cup, shivered and glanced back at her guest. "You are looking extremely well," she repeated.

Her private impression that this other aunt of Alma was getting shorter and stouter and of a greasier olive complexion every year, and more and more inclined to gabble and cackle in true Latin-American manner, and more and more addicted to terrible black coffee and violent gestures and loud colors in dress, she was not obliged to express. It was quite her own affair if she chose to consider quarter-Spanish—example, Alma—bad enough, and half-Spanish—example, Alma's Aunt Ester—much too bad. She was glad the visitor had come, for she wanted to talk with her about their niece. Ester Harding also was a widow without encumbrances, and really ought not to shirk her responsibility in the matter.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Miss Sylvester had put off her cloak and was looking into the silver pot in which the coffee had been brought. "I can't very well have any when there isn't any to have," she mused aloud. Then she sat down on a sofa with both the elder ladies regarding her. Aunt Sevenbanks smiled and was silent; Aunt Harding admired her gown of pale yellow chiffon over silk.

"You were at a ball?" said Aunt Harding. "How could you come away so soon? And with such a dress! Weren't the young men all wild to dance with you?"

"Oh, in New York, Aunt Ester? I thought you were up to date. Perhaps if I were married some one might take a fancy to me. However, it doesn't matter much. I don't fancy any of them. There is something so 'painful-duty'-like about them. Wild to dance with me! Why, if they had a lot of little pink angels down from Paradise——"

"Alma," requested Mrs. Sevenbanks, "be moderate."

"Anyway, I hate New York!" the girl

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

went on, exactly as she had spoken in the carriage. "Aunt Ester, do you never long for the old days? Don't you remember the good times we had down there?—the dances at the legation, the balls at the President's palace, the long room with canvased floor and spangles sprinkled over it to make it gay, the old-fashioned chandeliers with thousands of candles, the band that played and played, and the suppers in the balconies, the champagne and all the lovely speeches and the waltz, waltz, waltz, and the *danza* all night long till the sun came up over the mountains! Oh, to go back seven years and have it all over again—at fifteen!"

Mrs. Sevenbanks looked straight before her and made no sound. The suggestion of a fifteen-year-old girl at a ball may have been too appalling. Mrs. Harding, on the other hand, regarded their niece with sympathetic expression. Three consecutive cups of good black coffee had made her eyes shine. She also could remember happy hours under equatorial skies—days of sun splendor, nights of star glory.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"It is really tame up here, Aunt Ester," the girl went on. "I don't wonder it broke poor papa's heart when he was recalled. Half the time—I mean six months of the twelve—everything is unreal, artificial—heat and light and everything else. To-night at the Claytons' there was a man just up from the Argentine—exiled from some country—and he was telling me how he got away. It brought back old recollections—especially that last night at the palace—the night before papa got that abominable cablegram from Washington. I could see the lights and hear the mazurka that the band played in the alcove. . . ."

"O—oh!" Her Aunt Ester leaned forward with intense black eyes. "You remember that ball? It was fine! You had a good time, I think."

"Of course I did. It was there I danced so much with the attaché from—from Bolivia, with red hair. He came up this way, smiling and romantic—" she rose to illustrate—"and bowed away down, down, down. I don't see how he ever kept his

Miss Spivester's Marriage

balance. He had been drinking the health of the President of the United States in about twenty cognacs. Then we started off so—la-ah, l'la, l'la, l'la."

The golden sweep of chiffon, the memory of the sensuous music, the familiar motion, seemed suddenly to go to the elder lady's head. She sprang up with a jubilant cry that drew itself out into the continuous toot-tut-toot of horn and clarinet, and in her horribly high-heeled boots she danced.

Mrs. Sevenbanks's gracious mask of suffering had remained unaltered through all, but presently chancing to turn her eyes away to the door, that lady was visibly startled to observe the butler standing in the arch, his eyes riveted on a Corot on the opposite wall. He had, naturally, seen nothing else. His voice was suave. "Beg pardon, ma'am; shall I remove the coffee things, ma'am?"

And Mrs. Sevenbanks made answer, with carven countenance: "Yes, James, and as we shall retire at once you may wait and put out the lights."

CHAPTER II

SPANISH BLOOD

Mrs. HARDING had had her coffee and was down for late breakfast, English style, when her hostess appeared next morning. Her mood was as cheerful as the elaborate old-rose house gown she wore. She hastened to inform her sister-in-law that Alma had gone out with Alice Dow, "in that reprehensible American fashion, without an older person."

"I desired that she should go without me," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, "for I wished to speak with you about her."

"Why don't you let her get married?" asked Mrs. Harding. "She is twenty-one, isn't she?"

"In her twenty-third year," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, with patient stiffness. She always felt stiff of a morning until after taking

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

her tea. It was a sort of eye-opener that she absolutely required, and except on rare occasions was taken in her own room. This morning was one of the rare occasions. She had slept rather late, and she remembered Mrs. Harding had odd ways of early rising.

"*Ave Maria!*" was Mrs. Harding's next remark. "That is much too old; but you may have found some one you think suitable."

Mrs. Sevenbanks smiled. "I am afraid your visit to Chicago has crowded many things from your memory; for instance, some of Alma's characteristics. You must remember she has Spanish blood in her veins; she is hard to control."

"Of course," said Mrs. Harding; "that is only natural, since her mother, who was my only sister, was the child of a Spanish gentleman and an English lady."

Mrs. Sevenbanks ignored this recital of ancestry. "You know," she urged, mildly, "you and I are alike responsible."

"But what do you expect me to do?"

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

cried Mrs. Harding. "I have no settled home—I am on the wing. Do you wish me to take her with me to Paris—or Caracas? I am not sure to which place I shall go next. It would be easier to marry her off in Caracas."

Mrs. Sevenbanks shuddered. "I could hardly consent to that. Alma is an American, and should marry one of her own countrymen."

"One of these Yankees—these pale-eyed, white-blooded egotists? My husband was at least an Englishman."

Mrs. Sevenbanks reflected. The tea was beginning to take effect; she would soon feel able to smile. "Shall you mind if I speak very frankly?" she asked.

"Oh, you always do that."

"Well, then, my dear friend, my idea is that we have hardly coöperated as we should in this matter. Alma has certainly given me some bad moments of late. She is of age, and at any time can act according to her own judgment, or rather impulse. Were it not for her birth and breeding I should feel

Miss Splvester's Marriage

actual terror when she displays capricious and erratic ways, describing the life she led in that barbarous South American republic, and disparaging the United States. I often think it a misfortune that my brother ever went down there—apart from the terrible injustice of his being recalled. I do not refer to anything connected with his marriage, for of course your sister Dolores was a lovely woman. But it does seem as if there were a fatal fascination for some persons in the first taste of that wild and lawless life.”

“Perhaps you wouldn’t think it so lawless if you lived there a while,” said Mrs. Harding. “There is plenty of law.”

“Yes? But you understand what I mean. . . . What I was going to say . . . last night at the Claytons’—you certainly know who the Claytons are? I am speaking now in confidence—I should not like her to suppose I remarked it—last night Alma sat out at least two dances talking to a dark-skinned, large, odd-looking man, a General Somebody or other, she tells me, but most unpresentable and awkward.”

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"I thought she sat out the dances because her ankle was hurt."

"But there were others—the right kind of men—that she might have talked to. Besides, her ankle was not so bad or she would not have felt so cheerful when we returned home."

"Cheerful! Oh, you mean because we were dancing and singing?"

Mrs. Sevenbanks was silent. A very faint pink tinged her face. She remembered how the butler had stood in the doorway.

"And this large, dark somebody or other," suggested Mrs. Harding—"perhaps he is very rich."

Mrs. Sevenbanks sighed. "I doubt it. I believe she said he was an exile."

"Exiles sometimes carry away millions with them. You are afraid she has fallen in love with him?"

"In love?" repeated Mrs. Sevenbanks, with a shudder. "I doubt if the man be not some half-breed. Our new possessions are responsible for these alarming evidences."

Miss Splvester's Marriage

"Part Indian, you mean? But if he is so unattractive, what do you fear?"

Mrs. Sevenbanks compressed her lips. "Ugly men fascinate like snakes. However, it is not a case for argument, but for action. I rely on you, my dear Ester, to assist me in discouraging these wild ideas of Alma's about going back to those savage countries. Believe me, the day of her wedding will see a great load lifted from my mind."

"The day of any girl's wedding usually has that kind of effect on her relatives, nowadays," Mrs. Harding reflected, aloud. "I will try to do what I can to meet your wishes—if you will give me an idea how to begin. When she returns shall I read her a lecture?"

"Certainly not; that would be unwise. Only—forgive my frankness—if you would not encourage her again as you did last night."

"I shall try to remember."

"Thank you. Another thing; you might, if she alludes to him, express your disap-

Miss Splvester's Marriage

proval of the presumption of the person I have told you about——”

“Yes?”

“—and suggest that you look forward with solicitude to her marriage with some civilized Christian gentleman in proper position to become her husband. You know as well as I how Alma is situated in regard to money. My poor brother left hardly anything. I have this and my country house and a little other property—a comfortable life income. But in most of the estate I have only a life interest. I can do comparatively very little for her. You know just what you can do.”

“Oh, dear, yes. I have been gambling terribly—in the g. h's.”

Mrs. Sevenbanks started and flushed. “Pray do not let any one hear you.”

“No, of course not; but it is true. They are h's, you know—such fascinating h's! There is nothing like them in America; and that is fortunate, I suppose. Not even bridge whist——”

Mrs. Sevenbanks rose. “Let us go up—

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

stairs," she said ; " I have some directions to give the seamstress."

With Alma returned her friend, Alice Dow, a young lady for whom Mrs. Sevenbanks always had a cordial welcome. The cordiality might have had root in the knowledge that Miss Dow's cousin had married a very decent earl, and that the Dows themselves were financially solid, if unpretentious. Alice was rather plain, large-featured, large-boned. She was quite tall, and would make a fine-looking woman if she ever acquired flesh enough. There was self-assertion about her that compelled admiration.

Alma's aunts were both far back in the drawing-room when the girls came in. Mrs. Sevenbanks was writing a letter ; Mrs. Harding was at the piano trying to remember a Persian lullaby she had heard in Chicago. She deserted the instrument to converse with the young ladies. The Claytons' dinner dance of the night before seemed to interest her.

" I am sorry I was not there," said Miss Dow. " Alma tells me there was a foreigner

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

who told weird stories in broken, not to say shattered, English, and whom everybody seemed to take for a cannibal or a bandit."

"Was he handsome?" inquired Mrs. Harding, naïvely.

"About as beautiful as a totem pole," Alma replied. She noticed that her Aunt Sevenbanks had stopped writing to listen.

Alice Dow laughed. "He is an Indian, then?"

"He has some Indian blood, perhaps. I forget which tribe—we spoke of several. It might be Botocudo, or Bugre."

"Are not all those tribes cannibals?" came Mrs. Sevenbanks's cool, sweet inquiry across the room.

"Oh, yes, indeed," put in Mrs. Harding. "The terrible anthropophagi——"

"He seemed very fat and sleek," said Alma, indifferently. She began to think that her aunts had been discussing her and da Veiga. A rebellious sort of disgust came over her. Why should she not listen to a man because he was of another nationality—perhaps race? What difference did

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

it make to her if he were part Indian? What interest had she in him beyond the fact that he reminded her of days long past; of life in another zone, under a bluer sky and in happier companionship; of her dear father, of the old home, of the mother who had died while she was yet a child; of all the impressions of life in youth—perhaps of something else back in those long-gone days—something vague, fine, unacknowledged even in her own heart; something that partook of the delicacy and freshness of that saving grace of the North, the northern Spring?

Mrs. Harding spoke suddenly and irrelevantly. "In Paris, during my last visit, I met many South Americans. I don't know, Alma, whether you remember Vasquez—Roberto Vasquez. He was a writer—a poet, you know—and also, I think, a lawyer and once an attaché. Very handsome, with perfect features, and tall and straight. You ought to remember him. He came to the legation. Your father liked him. They tried to engage him to that terribly homely

Miss Splvester's Marriage

girl that—I forget her name. He was in Paris, still as handsome as ever, and not married yet. You don't remember him? But then you were so young."

"Yes," said Alma, slowly, "I remember Señor Vasquez." She paused a moment. "Why do you look at me? Do I seem pale? This ankle is going to bother me, after all."

CHAPTER III

ALMA IS SURPRISED

WHEN Alma and her friend had gone upstairs before luncheon Miss Dow shrugged her shoulders and laughed softly as she observed : " You hadn't fully realized the seriousness, had you ? "

" Of what ? "

" Of your little flirtation with the cannibal last night."

" I suppose I hadn't, though Aunt Louise did say something about it in the carriage, coming home. One would think I wanted to abduct him. Sometimes I fancy I might as well marry some ordinary brute of a man and escape."

" You wouldn't prefer an extraordinary brute ? "

" Such a preference could be easily satisfied, I imagine, if I did."

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

“Don't get bitter, my dear. Look at me; I'm twenty-five—nearly twenty-five—and single. I will be a hundred and twenty-five and single before I'll take any desperate step. I'd rather be bored than tortured.”

“Suppose you were both?”

“Nobody ever is.”

“Oh, yes, I have been; that is, bored and tortured by turns. You know how Aunt Sevenbanks is—and then she sends for Aunt Ester; and then, well, poor Aunt Ester, she would like to please me all the time, and how can she? This morning, while I was out, Aunt Sevenbanks simply filled her up to the ears with her painful duty—I'm sure it's a painful duty—toward me. She will begin to work on me presently. She has begun already, in fact—about the anthropophagi.”

“Why not get her off by herself and have a confidential talk? That is what I should do.”

“Aunt Louise allows no opportunity for that.”

Alice Dow was arranging her hair before the mirror. “You should create an oppor-

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

tunity—may I help myself to a hairpin or two? Thanks!—yes, create an opportunity. You are altogether too childlike, soft and unresisting and pliable. People can do what they please with you.”

“You are very much mistaken if you think so,” said Alma, angrily; “I have a very strong will of my own.”

“You think you have. Now, don’t get vexed. I tell you it is true. You haven’t bone enough in your composition, backbone or any other kind of bone. Look at your wrists. What you have are very pretty, but what use are they? You can’t play the piano; you are not a success at the violin. You never won a game of tennis, much less golf. I heard a man refer to you as the boneless maid. Of course he admired your beauty.”

“What man?”

“I think it was Frank Sands.”

“Why, he is more idiotic than I thought he was.”

“Oh, it wasn’t so bad. You are delicious to look at. But you haven’t resisting power. Look at my wrists. Do you think any one

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

will ever trouble my peace of mind?" She pushed back her narrow sleeve cuffs and regarded her angular forearms with sincere pride.

"You wouldn't fight, would you?" said Alma, half induced to laugh.

"I might," said Miss Dow, just as the maid tapped on the door to inform them that luncheon was ready.

As the two descended the stairs together Alma whispered, nervously: "If you notice you will see how Aunt Ester has been prepared for action."

"Primed and loaded, eh?"

But no tell-tale indication was discernible throughout the meal. Soon afterward Miss Dow took her leave with a reassuring glance. Presently Mrs. Sevenbanks telephoned for her carriage and announced her intention of going out. Would Mrs. Harding accompany her? Mrs. Harding thought she would better stay and visit with Alma.

They agreed to go up to Mrs. Harding's room, because Alma could then inspect some new gowns her aunt had brought from Paris. Two of them had been worn once in Chicago,

Miss Splvester's Marriage

the lady declared, and were of course ruined. One could only drive out in a closed carriage there, she said. And besides, there was the huge chimney of a power-house but a block away from the North Side mansion at which she had stopped.

One of the other gowns was too small for her. She had never worn it; she thought she would give it to Alma. It was a dinner dress of scarlet chiffon and satin. Alma thanked her and hated to deprive her of it, but she insisted, and even made her put the bodice on to see what alterations were necessary and if they could be made by Mrs. Sevenbanks's seamstress.

"And now, my dear," she said, "you see I wanted to have a talk with you while your Aunt Louise is out. For it seems to me you are not perfectly happy with her."

"Did she tell you I was not happy?" the girl asked, perversely.

"Oh, I can see."

"She talked with you about me this morning?" said Alma.

"She certainly did speak to me," Mrs.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Harding acknowledged. "And I asked her if she desired me to take you to Paris or Caracas."

"Oh, Aunt Ester! Would you--*will* you take me to Venezuela? Oh, how happy I should be to get away from New York! I don't care a bit for it. I don't care for society. I don't seem to belong to it."

"But, my dear child, you must! You see it is necessary. How else would you ever get properly married if you didn't?"

"Why should I get properly married? I don't see the necessity."

"But consider what a woman is at forty—single and thin—you will probably be thin—with the lines coming around her neck and a constant need to wear things to cover them; afraid to laugh because the marks around the mouth get deep, with always the tremendous expense for facial massage, and no husband to pay the bill."

"The men that I meet at the Claytons' and elsewhere," said Alma, "are very tiresome—and very insincere. I used to think

Miss Splvester's Marriage

it was only sincere people that tired one, but I was mistaken. My worldly knowledge is increasing. These men, you know, that make sweet speeches to one's face and when her back is turned call her names——"

"Names?"

"The boneless maid, for instance. Isn't that a nice title?"

"Why, it seems to me there was a poem your grandmamma used to be very fond of with that title. The boneless maid—or child—or it might have been painless—or sinless, I am not sure. Perhaps the sinless something."

Alma was not appeased. "I may be altogether lacking in bone," she said; "Alice Dow said so. All I know is that life is a bore most of the time, at least when you can't have any ideas of your own."

"Ideas of your own are like babies," said Mrs. Harding; "they are all right if you keep them quiet."

"I should be perfectly happy, Aunt Ester, if you would take me to Caracas. Why can't you? Only to be on horseback once

Miss Splvester's Marriage

more, galloping along beautiful mountain roads at sunrise, breathing the delicious air off the hill slopes, hearing such melody out of the forests, smelling such perfume from the orange groves ; climbing steep turns of path and suddenly coming along precipices to hear the roar of waterfalls ; fording streams, swollen yellow rivers or crystal mountain brooks ; stopping in the shade to scoop up delicious drinks with a *jícara*. Do you remember the journeys we had, papa and you and I and Mr. Harding, off to the mines or down to the banana *fincas* on the coast ? our rides through the great forests, where the monkeys in the tree-tops roared with the cold at daybreak when we were camping out, and the fun we had cooking our coffee over three logs, and the night in the thatched hut without walls, where the moonlight blazed silver fire and the nightingale sang in the thicket along the river ? ”

“ Yes, yes, I do remember,” said Mrs. Harding, drying her eyes ; “ I do remember those happy days, gone forever. I wish we could live them over, Alma ; but it is

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

impossible. I should be glad to take you with me, but your Aunt Louise would never consent. She told me so. She says you must give up the idea. You must marry a New York gentleman, she says. That is very hard." Her eyes were full again. "That is very hard. But I would never dare oppose your Aunt Louise. You must give up the idea. Ah, life is too sad! It is fortunate that we do not have to live forever." She dried her eyes once more and took up a gold-embroidered waist from the floor. "The hooks on this bodice are simply vile," she said; "I cannot make them hook at all. And the belt is rotten."

"Aunt Ester," Alma persisted, "you say Aunt Louise says I must marry a New York man. Do you think she has any one in particular in mind?"

"No," Mrs. Harding sighed, "I cannot say that."

"It wouldn't be a bit of use," the girl went on. "I am not going to marry. There was a time when I had foolish dreams of some one who would be brave and true and

Miss Splvester's Marriage

poetic. I have found out that it is all nonsense."

"Yes," said Mrs. Harding, submissively, "but then the best thing is to please your Aunt Louise as much as possible and avoid irritating her. It seems she was irritated last night because of that man—what did you say his name was?"

Alma was prevented from replying by the approach at the half-open door of a maid, who brought the butler's salver with a letter for Mrs. Harding. Alma, moving a little to let the girl pass her, saw beside the letter a card decorated with something that might be a coronet. A moment later Mrs. Harding read aloud: "Geraldina." She quickly broke the seal. "Say that I will be down soon," she instructed the servant, and handed the letter to Alma. "Only fancy! News from home—that is, from friends now over in Paris. How charming! I suppose I must dress." She caught up a yellow crêpe scarf and held it to her cheek. "My face not steamed yet, and—black as a buzzard. Such a pleasing letter from Severino Gon-

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

zalez. This Geraldina—a count—must be from Brazil. What is his other name? da——”

“Da Veiga,” read Alma, slowly. “Why, Aunt Ester, it must be the cannibal. I didn’t know he was a count.”



CHAPTER IV

DA VEIGA CALLS

“REALLY!” Mrs. Sevenbanks could put more into the three syllables than any other woman in New York. Mrs. Harding had been telling her about Señor da Veiga’s call, his excellent letter of introduction and his very proper behavior. Mrs. Sevenbanks had looked at the card and smiled. “He called *with* the letter? . . . Alma saw him?”

“I sent for her to come down. It seems to me there was no harm; besides, for a girl there is no man more interesting than the prohibited man. I do not think you need have the slightest concern about this Count Geraldina.”

“If he is a South American, and an exile, how does he come to be a count?” Mrs. Sevenbanks inquired.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"Why, sometimes titles are conferred in Europe on South Americans of vast wealth."

"You mean they buy them. And you think he possesses vast wealth?"

"No, I do not," said Mrs. Harding, with candor. "I think he has no more than enough to live on. It seems he has not been long in New York. He at first stopped at a hotel, he says, but now has his own bachelor apartments in Madison avenue. I believe he would amuse Alma very much, and I advise you to let me present him to you and to receive him kindly if he calls. Others will receive him, you know. Besides, he is really not bad looking. It is only a matter of tan."

"He seems thoroughly impossible," objected Mrs. Sevenbanks, "but it may be that your view of the matter is not an unwise one."

In this way she gave a grudging permission, and da Veiga was brought under her personal inspection a few days later. She was polite to him, but she did not forget to inquire again about the title. Da Veiga,

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

seated before her, of erect, imposing figure, over which his Prince Albert coat seemed buttoned with difficulty, with mustache and imperial waxed into diabolical points, a smile, as gracious and fatuous as that of an Indian idol, distending his cheeks, enlightened her after his own peculiar fashion :

“Until now, madama, I ’ave not make up my mind. Gradiil ’ave I thought ’ow in my own country my father did say, ‘I will be no more the *Conde*.’ And ’e did fling forth the flag and did cry, ‘I am *republicano*!’ and with three times the *viva* in ’is throat, bang! ’e did fall down dead! Then I, who was in ’is place *Conde*, I did say the same; I did cry, ‘*Viva la republica*!’ But now, madama, you see, it may be in New York if I am not one *conde*, what I am?”

Mrs. Sevenbanks took her cue from this ingenuous confession. She would know something about his source of income.

“A title,” she remarked, urbanely, “pre-supposes certain hereditary qualities that should merit esteem. One does well to

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

think twice before dispensing with it. Of course, an extremely large fortune is required to maintain a title, even in New York."

"Ah, that is it. I did say to my friends that I did thank them for their vare kind offer. 'Motch oblige,' I did say—'motch oblige, my dear sirs. I will not to be *senador*.' You see, I rather make another million or two in New York. I place my concession and I sell my stock."

Mrs. Sevenbanks gazed at him in silence, her grayish-blue, impartial eyes studying him from the white scar at the centre of his forehead to the rich brown under his skin. And he returned her gaze with the same ingenuous, Indian-idol smile. Perhaps if Mrs. Sevenbanks had put up her glass—she was very slightly near-sighted, and the glass was remarkably strong—she might have discovered, lurking under the waxed points of his mustache, the flicker of muscle that no human countenance has ever succeeded in wholly suppressing—the flicker that gives the lie look.

From that time on Mrs. Sevenbanks

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

seemed less apprehensive. During the days that Mrs. Harding remained at the house da Veiga called frequently. On one occasion, when he came early, Alma entertained him in company with Alice Dow. When he went away Miss Dow informed her friend that she had been reading up on aboriginal tribes of the Western Continent. "The Buggries," she said, "or whatever it is——"

"Boogray," corrected Alma.

"Well, whatever it is, you should see the pictures of them, with rings in their noses, and under lips propped out with bits of stone. Oh, they are delightful! Now, if this particular Bug——"

"Oh, what has the poor wretch ever done to you?" cried Alma. A sudden inexplicable pity had come into her heart for the unfortunate, uncouth individual who had sat so ill at ease in her aunt's drawing-room and still had seemed so loath to go away. Alice Dow glanced sharply at her.

"You alarm me," she said. "Please don't alarm me again. Embrace follows right after pity in the poem, you remember."

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"One might find it difficult to embrace such dimensions," Alma responded, listlessly. She was never offended at Alice Dow. As for da Veiga, she still pitied him.

The next time he came there were others present, and she was pouring tea. Some of the guests had met him before, and appeared pleased and amused at the second meeting; others, regarding him for the first time, looked as if they were not quite sure whether or not to follow Mrs. Sevenbanks's lead. That lady was thoroughly courteous, if not cordial, to the foreigner. There was humility, Alma thought, in the way he took his leave, saying, "I did not exespect to found so many ladies and gentlemen. I did come to say good-bye to Mrs. Harding. She is one vare fine lady. I will come to-morrow to say good-bye to 'er."

He kept his word next day, but arrived too late, for Mrs. Harding, who was going to Washington, had just driven away with Mrs. Sevenbanks to the station. Alma, who had caught cold and dared not go out, was at home, alone.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"I was preparing to be awfully dull, Count Geraldina," she said, lightly, "but you will brighten me up. We will speak Spanish, and you must tell me some of your thrilling stories about the Paraguay War and the frontier battles. You will have some coffee, will you not? My Aunt Ester took coffee just before going. She prefers it. Tea is for sick people, she says."

Da Veiga drank the contents of the cup with a solemn face, and almost at one swallow.

"She is one vare nice lady," he declared. "When you write to 'er you must please give most respectful and cordially regards." He balanced the egg-shell cup on his knee. "She is one flower," he pursued, "from those fair land. Oh, those fair land! Last night in my dream I did go back and see my 'ome. *Ai de mi!* I did wake and I did weep. Again I did see the mountains and the rivers wide and deep. Then in my dream I did look far down and I did see the smoke and 'ear the terrible *cañone*. And I did found the *diablos*, the enemy, all around,

Miss Splvester's Marriage

and all their guns point on my. They take my to the prison, they tie my, they leave my. I know what they say. Next morning—bang! shot dead. Oh, my God! They set bread and water by my—they leave my there. Night come. I pray, 'Oh, *mio Dios!* savèd my!' I work my 'ands for 'ours. Pretty soon—bim! I break the rope. I untie my feet. I listen. No sound. Then I 'ear something like some one *ronca*—the man they did put to guard my, 'e did sleep. 'E—what you call it?—'e began *roncar*. I creep out. I take the knife from 'im. I creep on. The next man move; I take 'im so—by that throat. 'E draw the knife and so—cut my. I did stab 'im back. 'E did fall. I did found my 'orse, I climb on 'im. I ride—fast—fast—oh, my poor 'orse! I did clasp the neck, I did kiss—I did spur 'im on. On—on—oh, *mio Dios!* I know the road; a league, another league, until I get over cross the *limites*. I kiss, I baig my 'orse, I put my face to the neck—'e did go on—on—on—then 'e did fall—boum—dead!"

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

In his excitement he had thrown himself heavily from his chair on his knees, forgetting the egg-shell cup and saucer. And these now lay in quite small pieces. He looked at them in alarm.

"I am vore sorry," he began.

"Oh, it doesn't matter at all," said Alma.

He rose slowly. "But I will buy one more for you," he continued, as he got upon his feet.

"Don't think of it," she insisted, with an amiable smile. "I was so interested! How terrible it is to be at the mercy of enemies! And in Paraguay!—the Paraguayans are rather cruel, I think."

"They are *diablos!*" said da Veiga; "they will eat their fathers."

The flicker that Mrs. Sevenbanks had not observed was around his mouth. And Mrs. Sevenbanks had not observed it, how should a person of half her age?

He said good-bye and went away, and Alma made haste to secure all the fragments of the broken cup and saucer. She wondered if she should have much

Miss Splvester's Marriage

trouble to replace the cup, and thought, amusedly, that if her aunt had been there it would have been interesting to watch her face. Not that the slightest vexation would have shown itself, but on the other hand, Mrs. Sevenbanks would have perhaps foregone her exquisite good-form impulse to break another, in order to prove to her guest what very destructible, trivial matters such tea-cups are. "Ah, well, the poor man was hardly to blame," she decided. "I made him dramatic. He looked absurd on the floor. If his waistcoat buttons had burst off, as I thought they were going to . . ."

CHAPTER V

IN THE PARK

THE second morning following Miss Sylvester received a letter :

MY DEAR, KIND MISS ALMA:

I fill vare surry to say that as yet is not chure that I can found the cop I did break last night. I do not know if I have time laft to go to the store to-day, because at 3 p. m. I shall meet some gentleman who did ask to buy some stock from my. Gradill I have thought of you, *no sabiendo porqué!* You are one of those yong lady that has mad a graty impression in my mind! I most say that you have mad me to thinke that true beuty only exesist at the Latins blood. Remember that I will alwes be your friend.

By-in-by,

Yours respectfull and cordial,

RUFINO DA VEIGA.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

She had been feverish all night, and had been awake much of the time wondering if she should be well enough to go out in the morning and duplicate the broken article, and where the set had been purchased. As yet she believed the cup had not been missed. She had just taken some very strong coffee, hoping to brace her tremulous nerves and hold them together, but they seemed ready to fly apart. Now, under her aunt's steadfast gaze, as she opened and read the letter, she felt herself going all to pieces. Something in her back seemed to give way with a snap; her limbs began to tremble, her throat muscles were knotted. Suddenly she began to laugh, with laughter that was strange and painful, and then tears were running down her cheeks, tears, tears, tears that would never cease. She fell back on the chair helpless and conscious of her helplessness.

"James," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, "my salts—in the drawing-room, on the onyx pedestal, I think." In the meantime she was putting ice water on the girl's temples

Miss Splvester's Marriage

and taking charge of da Veiga's unfortunate communication.

Later on when Alma had recovered enough to go up to her room and lie down, and Mrs. Sevenbanks had given her a spoonful of her own particular remedy, the girl inquired what had become of the letter.

"I brought it up-stairs, of course," said Mrs. Sevenbanks. "I glanced at it—it seemed proper I should know what news you had received to affect you so terribly. I need hardly say that I, too, am shocked. The impertinence of the man is beyond conception; I should like, by the way, to know what he has reference to; he speaks of something that was broken. He surely hasn't broken anything here?"

"Oh, yes, he has, Aunt Louise," said Alma, with desperate resolution. She drew a long breath. "It was—one of your cups."

"One of my cups!" Mrs. Sevenbanks turned pale. "You can't mean my five-o'clock-tea set!"

Alma nodded weakly. "Of course he will replace——"

Miss Splvester's Marriage

“Replace! the clumsy monster!” Mrs. Sevenbanks trembled with anger. “Replace! They are no ordinary—they were specially imported! Alma, this is really too much! To destroy my property and to presume to address a letter to you! I shall give the butler orders. It is all your Aunt Ester’s fault—all her fault! I shall write her very plainly.”

She turned and went trembling from the room. Alma lay still and thought. After a while she got up and saw that da Veiga’s letter, properly folded in its envelope, was on the dressing-case. Her aunt’s perfect breeding was always to be relied on. She lay down again, reproaching herself for the thought that had suggested itself that Mrs. Sevenbanks might make use of his letter to insult him.

The medicine she had taken soothed her, and she remained in bed nearly all day. Just before dinner she discovered that da Veiga had called and left cards, and had been told that the ladies were not at home. She felt sorry for him, and wished she had

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

not impressed him as "kind." Probably he would keep on calling and being told they were not at home. He would perhaps think it was her fault, that she meant to be unkind to him—because of the cup! Or perhaps he would write to her again, and her aunt would be even more vexed. She wished vaguely that she might come upon him somewhere outside the house and in some way be able to give him a hint that her aunt was very rigid in her notions; or perhaps lead him to think that they were going away, so that he would not venture to call again. At all events, she could correct his possible idea that North American young ladies are more emancipated in the matter of receiving letters from gentlemen than Spanish-American young ladies.

The next day she felt very much better, and as it was a delightful Spring morning she started out soon after luncheon to call on Alice Dow. She had gone a few blocks from her home, had, in fact, arrived at an entrance to the Park, when all at once she saw coming slowly toward her—da Veiga.

Miss Splvester's Marriage

He did not seem to see her, and she stood irresolute for a moment, wondering if he could be on his way to call at her home. But presently he glanced in her direction, quickened his steps and came on to meet her. He had a parcel in each hand and could only make one of his low, absurd bows.

"I did wish to take some flowers," he began, holding out to her the parcel in his left hand.

"Flowers? Oh, thank you. You are very kind." They were American beauty roses, and she took the paper from them and inhaled their fragrance with great delight. There were few people on the Avenue, and it seemed to her that the opportunity she desired had come quickly, and she must make the most of it. "I am so sorry," she said, "that I could not have the pleasure of receiving you. But you know we are very busy now; there is so much to be done before we go away to the country. We are going very early this year—quite immediately, you know." Her ears were beginning to burn, as they always did when she



"'I did wish to take some flowers,' he began . . ."

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

was telling anything not strictly true. At such times it was her neck that blushed rather than her cheeks.

"You are going away from New York?" repeated da Veiga, with solemn eyes. "But you did get one letter I did write to you?"

"Yes," said Alma, hastily. "Yes, and so, you see, I shall be saying good-bye to you for a long while, as I shall not see you again. And you mustn't mind about that cup——"

"I did find one cop, and I did bring," said da Veiga, extending the other parcel.

She hesitated. If her aunt were partly pacified! . . . The desire to see what he had brought seized her. Hardly any one was passing near them. It was but a few steps into the great Park—under a tree whose leaves seemed to have unfolded in the night stood a bench—only nurse-maids and their charges.

"Let us go over and sit down for a moment," she said. "I have been ill, and am not strong." In any case she must prevent his calling again. "It was kind of you to

Miss Splvester's Marriage

trouble about it," she then said, opening the paper and the little box as she spoke. "It was most kind of you," she repeated, slowly and falteringly, as her eyes fell on the heavy German china he had selected. "My aunt," she went on, "has—has already ordered it replaced, but it was not the less kind of you. And this is very pretty, though slightly larger."

"It is yours," said da Veiga, solemnly.

"Oh, thank you." She gazed alternately at the flowers and the cup. Could she go on carrying these to Alice Dow's? She dared not return home, for da Veiga would beg to accompany her. If she carried the cup to the Dows' Alice's mother would have to hear the story. She would not mind if it were only Alice—but Alice's mother! If she could get away from da Veiga doubtless she could find a messenger office and send the cup home, addressed to herself. But in that case her aunt would see it and wonder. She could invent no possible excuse. It bore not the slightest resemblance to the precious set.

Miss Splvester's Marriage

Da Veiga broke the silence, that had become strange and noticeable. "You will go away—out of New York?"

"Yes," she smiled. "You know every one goes away from New York in the Summer. It is always so hot."

"And to where will you go?"

"To the country," said Alma, nervously. "Quite away from here. Off in the mountains, you know."

"I am glad that you will be in the mountains," said da Veiga, "for I like the mountains. By-in-bye I will come to see you. You will give me the directions?"

Alma made no reply. She sat very still, gazing across—far across—at a lady passing down the Avenue. As she gazed her face was growing whiter every minute.

"What is that?" demanded da Veiga, with sudden sharpness. "What is the matter?"

"Oh," she said, relaxing in an instant. "I thought—I thought it was my aunt, and I was frightened."

"You are 'fred of your aunt?" he asked. "She is not one kind lady?"

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"Oh, yes," said Alma, slowly. "She is very kind."

"But you are 'fred of 'er?"

"She would be very vexed to find me sitting here—with a gentleman."

"But you are with my. If one man look at you I shoot—bang—'e is dead!"

"But that would be very terrible," she remonstrated. It seemed to her she was only talking to a big child whom it was hard to get rid of.

"Nothing shall be terrible that I will do for you," said da Veiga, emphatically.

The girl flushed. "I must go now," she said. "I will bid you good-bye, and I will take with me this pretty souvenir and the flowers."

"I will go by you, and I will carried them," he suggested.

"Oh, no, no; that would not be proper—and my aunt would be so angry. Good-bye, Señor da Veiga." She held out her hand.

He bowed low and touched his lips to her glove. "Good-bye," he said, mournfully, "my only friend. Good-bye, farewell."

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Alma walked hurriedly away out of the Park and left him there. She had tried to show him what he must not do, and she had succeeded only in drawing him and herself into a ridiculous position. Suppose any one had seen him kissing her hand ! She hardly knew where she was going. And that wretched German cup and saucer—what to do with them ? Couldn't she lose the box somewhere ? She would go into some store and buy something, and pretend to forget the parcel ; but the clerk would run out after her. She would drop it as she crossed the street ; but she would be seen by some policeman and kept in view for suspicious conduct. She would leave it in a street car ; but the conductor would shout after her. She went on, hot and tormented, toward the Dows'. As she turned the corner she came on a ragged urchin. "Here, boy," she cried, thrusting it at him, "take this—it is a pretty cup—take it home to your—to your mother—quick !" and fled. As she ran up the steps and touched the bell button she heard a shrill voice inquiring where she

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

had "swiped " it. But she only smiled—she was rid of the thing. Nor did she mind Alice's suggestion that she appeared feverish. She presented the roses to Alice's mother with a delightful feeling of diplomacy. Da Veiga was not mentioned.

CHAPTER VI

MISS SYLVESTER DISAPPEARS

IN reply to her mother's plain question Alice Dow admitted she had known something about the affair. "I am no tale-bearer or mischief-maker, mamma," she said, bluntly. "I knew Alma was not happy with her aunt, and I was not surprised at any odd action of hers. As to his paying attentions to her, I have seen them walking together. But I didn't imagine it had gone as far as an engagement. I don't suppose it is anything worse than that," she concluded.

Mrs. Sevenbanks had sent a note begging them to come to her at once, as she was in great distress over Alma, who had refused to decline the addresses of an adventurer. She particularly wished to see Alice.

Miss Splvester's Marriage

"Of 'course, if you insist, mamma," said the girl, "but I reserve my right not to interfere. If Alma should contemplate marrying Count Geraldina, who can prevent? She is of age, and must accept responsibilities. I don't know what we are going over to see Mrs. Sevenbanks for, anyway."

"She has sent for us," said the mother, finally, and with some sharpness. And of course they went.

Mrs. Sevenbanks was sitting rigidly upright in the drawing-room. She seemed too piteously helpless to rise. Mrs. Dow went up and took her hand. "There is nothing serious the matter, I trust?"

"I am waiting to hear," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, with an effort. "I have sent a messenger—Alma has gone away."

"Gone away?" Mother and daughter repeated the words together.

"Yes. I am obliged to confess that we had a most painful interview. It began with my acquainting her with a proposal of marriage I had received for her; from an excellent *parti*—Colonel Clifford's cousin,

Miss Splvester's Marriage

Mr. Addison Clifford, a wealthy widower, as you know. She made some impertinent remarks about his first three wives, and then informed me that for weeks she had been permitting this adventurer's attentions—secretly, of course. I naturally expressed my horror, my aversion to the man, my disbelief in his title of count.” Mrs. Sevenbanks paused and breathed exhaustedly. “She then assured me that the person had proposed marriage, and she had decided to accept him. I could hardly believe my senses. I begged her to consider what she was saying—to remember that she might yet care for some good man, and would then feel shame at having spoken in this way. She answered that she had had a romantic affection in her youth for some one favorably known to her father, that they had been separated forever, and that all the feeling she was now capable of—sympathy—was given to this—person. I was naturally very angry. I bade her believe that if ever she took such a false step she must expect no countenance from me, no legacy. She re-

Miss Splvester's Marriage

torted that as he was, or would be, a millionaire, it mattered little. I cannot help thinking that she is not in her right mind. It seemed to me that I must see Alice and ask her if Alma had told her anything."

"Oh, Mrs. Sevenbanks," exclaimed Alice, "I am so sorry! But really I can't believe she will do anything so foolish. She will return presently, I am sure. We have only to wait."

"I have already waited nearly three hours," said Mrs. Sevenbanks.

"I could never have believed it of Alma," said Mrs. Dow. "Like Alice, I cannot think she will commit any folly. But did she not say where she was going?"

"She said—" Mrs. Sevenbanks spoke faintly—"that she was going to meet da Veiga and that—they were going to All Asphodels' Church to—be married."

"You forbade her?" cried Mrs. Dow. The Dows were so very old-fashioned.

"Forbade? She is twenty-three. . . . I did not credit it. She soon left the house. An hour ago I sent—to All Asphodels'. And I am still waiting—the reply."

Miss Sylbester's Marriage

The Dow ladies looked at each other in consternation.

"There is nothing to do but wait," Alice repeated, "and you must have courage, dear Mrs. Sevenbanks."

"If the worst comes," said Alice's mother, "perhaps there is really nothing against the man. He seems to be received by some very nice people. Though he is not exactly the kind one would think of selecting for a charming young girl, he might still prove a devoted husband. He has been at the Claytons', and——"

"Mamma!" cried Alice, reproachfully.

"My dear, I am only looking at the darkest side; it is well to be prepared. And if he has such a great deal of money—for, after all, money is the chief thing nowadays——"

"But *has* he money? *Has* he money?" Mrs. Sevenbanks urged the question with a strange despair. "*Has* he money?" Her voice was almost a wail. Silence ensued for some moments. "I have tried," said Mrs. Sevenbanks then, "to make Alma's life a

Miss Splvester's Marriage

happy one. I should not have indulged her more had she been my own daughter—no, rather less. Whatever she has longed for I have sought to give her. I cannot remember to have denied her a single thing. It was my desire to see her happy. There seemed born in her, however, that strange taste for those wild countries. You know my brother was Consul down there when he met and married her mother. Years later he was appointed Minister—only to be unjustly recalled, for the mere expression of an opinion. I could not take her to South America, but I would have taken her to London, to the Continent, to Egypt, around the world, to any place where there is no yellow fever. It seemed as if her one wish ungratified was to go where there is yellow fever. It seemed to me one might be happy without contracting that disease. The little property that her father left—it was extremely little, after unfortunate investments—I sought to preserve for her. It yields but a pitiful six hundred a year. The cruellest part is her having met this man and

Miss Splvester's Marriage

walked with him on the Avenue. Fortunately it is a time of year when no one is in town. We should have gone away but for my delaying because of the Clifford proposal."

The Dow ladies regarded her in pitying silence. It all seemed unreal, impossible. The Sevenbanks pride and reserve to crumble in this fashion? Was it really Mrs. Sevenbanks? They were conscious of great moral discomfort. It was plainly their duty as intimate friends to remain until the messenger returned, but they would have been glad to escape. Their curiosity was considerable, but it was overshadowed by dread. They felt that if, on the other hand, their fears were unfounded, Mrs. Sevenbanks would regret having said so much. The whole thing was most unfortunate. Besides, it was no less embarrassing to sit waiting in silence than impossible in such moments of suspense to introduce any other subject.

Intolerable intervals must have an end. The fine warning of an electric bell preceded only by some seconds the entrance of the butler with a letter.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

“ Dear Mrs. Sevenbanks, do have courage,” said Alice, as she had said before. “ Shall I open it ? ”

Mrs. Sevenbanks, trying to rise, murmured a faint assent.

“ It is from Alma,” said the girl, tremulously. “ It only says, ‘ We were married, as I told you, at All Asphodels’ and go at once——’ ”

She stopped, for Mrs. Sevenbanks had sunk down in a quivering, helpless heap.

CHAPTER VII

LIFE AND ILLUSIONS

DA VEIGA and his bride had not gone away on any of the elaborate wedding tours he had previously suggested. There were certain capitalists he must meet who were to form a company of which he should be treasurer. Alma remained for the present in the Madison avenue apartment to which he had taken her. As she had never lived in an apartment, the novelty was pleasing. The rooms were smaller than any to which she had ever been accustomed, but they were delightfully, even luxuriously, furnished, even to an excellent little white-and-gold piano. There was only one servant—besides, of course, the weekly laundress—but this was a very capable Swedish woman. They were on the top floor, and there was a fine view

Miss Splvester's Marriage

and frequently a refreshing breeze. When da Veiga went away a few days after their marriage and left her at the window, looking out, she said to herself that at least he was a kind man, and as they were to have a good deal of money she would never need to regret the step she had taken.

By this time her Aunt Sevenbanks had got over the shock. By this time word had doubtless been sent her Aunt Ester, who was now in Paris, acquainting her with the result of Severino Gonzalez's unfortunate letter of introduction. By this time the Dows knew of her marriage, and Alice had shrugged her shoulders and said her say about aboriginal tribes. By this time it had been whispered about among such of her aunt's friends as had not left the city, and it would soon ring in the ears and roll under the tongues of those at the seaside and in the country what awful thing that pretty little niece of Mrs. Sevenbanks had gone and done. There had not been much in the newspapers about it, fortunately, and the meagre announcement she had seen had made no mention of da

Miss Splvester's Marriage

Veiga's title, so that there would be no ridicule on that point.

It was rather nice to have some one morally or physically on his knees to her half the time. The warm weather was enervating, and they led a lazy life. Da Veiga always slept very late in the morning. At ten he would have his cup of black coffee, his cigarette case of black cigarettes and his morning newspaper of black headlines brought to him in bed. At twelve or later, after slow consumption of the contents of each of these, he would get up and make a correspondingly slow toilet.

They had been married a month or more when the first faint shadow of disillusion came creeping into that apartment. Alma had risen early one morning at the touch of a sunbeam that had lifted her eyelids, and had herself brought the coffee and the newspaper—the cigarette case was already under his pillow—to her husband. She had thought he was awake, and he was not. There was a sudden commotion of the bedclothes, a heavy lurching over, a savage human growl: "You

Miss Splvester's Marriage

don't will let my sleep! 'Ere 'ave I not sleep all night. You make my——"

In the shock of surprise and fright she let the cup slip, some drops of very hot coffee splashed on his face, and the Count Geraldina sat up in bed and swore in his own language an amazing oath.

Three hours later he was on his knees saying good-bye and calling her his angel, his life, his Alma indeed, his veritable soul, before setting out for Delmonico's, where he was to meet some gentlemen. For the first time it seemed to her there was too much wax on his mustache and chin tuft.

That evening he returned very late. He had had a three-hour luncheon, he said, and was not hungry. He was sorry not to have come home sooner, and he would have a plate of consommé. The wine he had drunk at luncheon caused him to speak louder than usual, and he ate his soup audibly. After dinner—it was a long Midsummer day and still light at eight—they sat talking in the bow window of their small drawing-room.

"I did show to them 'ow they shall or-

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

ganize their companeevah," said da Veiga, getting his cigarette case from the top of a curio cabinet, "and I did talk to them like one *diablo*. 'Gentlemens,' I did say, 'you will not found any other way. You give my commixion or you give my cash. You give my what I shall need. One million—what is that?'"

He moved about looking for matches, and Alma quickly rose to supply the want. "But I thought the company was already organized," she said.

He continued to move about the room and made no reply to this. "You see," he went on with his own train of thought, "I 'ave long know those peoples. But I found one way to get that money." He sat down again and smoked harder, gazing across the town. Presently he took the cigarette holder from his lips. "I 'ave too much pain to smoke," he said. "Was 'ere one man did shoot my in those wars; 'ere in this cheek."

"Wasn't the bullet extracted?" she inquired.

"Oh, that bullet. It near did kill my.

Miss Spibester's Marriage

You see back of this ear one mark. By this it did go out."

Alma reflected. "I suppose you are joking," she said. "There is a look in your eyes and around your mouth as if what you say is not true." The flicker had made itself dimly perceptible to her, though even yet she did not fully comprehend its meaning.

"What you say?" cried da Veiga. He tried to seem hurt at the suggestion, but was soon laughing and telling of jewels he had seen that day which he should purchase for her later on.

It seemed to her that night that sleep would never come. The room was very warm; July in town was something she had never before known. What air came in at the windows had no purity left; it seemed to rise soiled with the foul breath of thousands on thousands. The moon, some three hours high, was full and orange red, with the promise of still greater heat. She had not seen it so intense of color since the year before, when, she remembered, it had risen over the

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

dunes that lay between the sea and the cottage where her aunt and she had dwelt. From this memory she gave thought to her aunt, serious, long thought for the first time in those fifteen days of changed existence. She recalled every circumstance of leaving home ; how when she had sent for her trunks they had been delivered to the expressman without word or line ; how no communication and no reproach had come to her. From remembering she could not but turn to speculating on what her aunt had said or done, if anything, in the matter ; if the Dows had censured her very much, and if they would cut her were she to meet them on the street when they came back to the city in the Autumn. She wondered if her aunt had really felt very bad or was merely a little sad and much relieved to be rid of her responsibilities. She wondered what had become of Clifford, the widower. She wondered when she should meet her aunt again and what words would be exchanged between them. She felt a strange uneasiness at the thought of that meeting. She felt as if her aunt might

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

ask her some unanswerable question ; she felt restless and suffocated ; her limbs were hot, and ached. She would have liked to spread a sheet on the floor of the drawing-room and stretch herself on it, but she feared to disturb da Veiga. He was long since asleep—dreaming perhaps of the men with whom he had had the luncheon. She felt that the night was going to be very long and she herself very lonely. She felt as if something had changed ; as if some veil was torn away and she saw more clearly. There was a heavy feeling on her heart. It seemed to her that she had done harm to some human being, and could never repair it. Tears oozed slowly from under her eyelids and wet her face and presently the pillow. Her throat contracted so that she could hardly breathe. She had not meant to be unkind . . . to any one ; she had not been able to be unkind . . . to da Veiga. And thus . . . she still had been unkind . . . to others . . . perhaps to herself!

CHAPTER VIII

MORE ILLUSIONS

“OH, poor my darling!” Da Veiga had come home late again. “To-day was one vare warm day. I was near to die. You see they did meet. They did send for my and I did go—” The perspiration stood large on his brow as he spoke. “They think to rob one poor foreigner, and they make mistake. Those Americanos are one—I beg your pairdone, I was near to swear. Oh, *querida*, when I did feel sure I did like to say, ‘I take you so—by that neck, I break it—so, with my two ’ands.’”

Alma, watching him in a fascinated way, moved back unconsciously, a trifle pale.

“What is that?” he cried, irritably. “You are ’fred?” Then suddenly changing to a smile, “*Querida*, I will go take off my coat, also my colyar. You did eat?”

Miss Sylbester's Marriage

No? We eat together. But frest I will drink one glass of water."

She carried it to him in the dressing-room, and he paused to swallow the contents in a single long, large draught and ask for more.

"But it is ice water," she said, "and you are very warm——"

"Oh, well, well, well!" he cried, crossly, flinging off his clothing. "Vare well, I wait." When he had attired himself more comfortably they went into the dining-room together, where the Swedish servant was placing the soup on the table.

"Why is not that window ope'?" he demanded, still very cross.

"There is a strong breeze," said Alma, "and I thought the soup—and you——"

He would not wait for the explanation but threw up the sash with a noisy bang and took his seat. "I am so fresty," he murmured, seizing a second glass of water and swallowing it between two breaths. "What *sopa* is that?" He tasted it suspiciously.

"It is cream of celery, I think," Alma responded, feebly.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"Cream of *infierno*!" He flung down his spoon. "Where is that *ajo*? That woman is one estúpida! I am sick of eat that *sopa* made by 'er. She is one big, oogly Swedie. I will send 'er from that kitchen; I will found one man." He had overlooked the garlic on a small dish near his plate. Now observing it, he began to tear it viciously into small pieces and drop it into the soup. "I will found one man," he repeated.

"Oh, Rufino, what could I do with just a man?" said Alma, beginning to show petulance. "I am here all alone, and I must have a maid. It seems odd enough, anyway—only one servant."

Da Veiga laughed. His favorite dish had restored his humor. "Oh, what a fine weather!" he cried, as the wind blew in strong over the lower housetops; "what a fine weather!" His countenance glistened with moisture; he suggested a large sponge. He would have no dessert, only his coffee and *cigarros*. The wind blew in delightfully. Later, when they returned to the drawing-room, he began to hum a song that Alma

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

had always liked—"O, Linda Flor." It came up with such ease from his deep chest that she had often wondered if he might not have been a really great singer. His ordinary speaking voice was melodious and well modulated. It was, in truth, one of his chief attractions, although she had never especially considered the fact.

After a little da Veiga ceased humming and spoke in a tone of retrospection.

"One girl did used to sing that song. I did know 'er." The pupils of his eyes darkened slowly with emotion. "She was one *diablo*," he said, under his breath. "I was near to kill 'er one day."

Alma stopped playing instantly and turned toward him. "To kill whom?" she asked.

"One girl did sing that song."

"But why did you wish to kill her?" she insisted; "did she sing so badly?"

"She did try to make my love 'er, and I did 'ate 'er soon." He sat comfortably in his easy-chair, his feet on the little sofa that stood in the bow-window curve. From this window the view covered three directions.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

One saw many steeples and spires and tremendous hotel buildings and far away the haze that rose from the river.

"Now is vare motch more cool," said da Veiga, after an extended silence. He turned and saw that Alma had disappeared. "Where you are, *querida*?" he demanded.

"I am lying down in the bedroom," she answered, through the silken portières. "I am tired."

Then came another silence.

Some time later, it might have been hours, she was awakened by deep groans. Da Veiga had not retired, but had fallen asleep on the bow-window sofa. There had come a rapid change of atmosphere; the night had turned cold, as if a storm had burst somewhere.

"*Querida!* I am vare sick—near to die!"

"What . . . is the matter?"

It had taken some moments for her to come back from spirit wanderings. Her dream had been of the dunes down by the sea, where, with her aunt, she had spent the Summer the year before. There had been a

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

tempest, and it was calm again, and there was sunlight shining over the sea. Now she emerged from the dimness of the bedroom in her white, clinging draperies, and shivering with cold and alarm, repeated the question.

"I did take cold," he murmured, with a long shudder. "I breathe so—vare 'ard I breathe. 'Ere in my breast I am sick. Maybe I come to die this night. *Ai, ai!* Maybe I come to die!"

"Will you not retire?" she asked, with her hand on his forehead. He responded only with a deeper groan. She turned the lights higher and sat down beside him. "If you will not go to bed," she said, presently, "I will cover you with blankets here and watch at your side awhile." She drew down the windows. He seemed to her not ill, but merely chilled and stiff from lying in the draughts. She realized that her alarm had been very fleeting, and it gave her a sense of uneasiness. Her thoughts were slightly confused, yet there was no actual fear.

But sleep did not come to him, even when

Miss Spibester's Marriage

she had tucked coverlets carefully about his couch and made herself comfortable in a Turkish chair. He continued to speak dreamily at intervals.

“ I am one poor foreigner,” he murmured, “ yet so my wife is vare good to my. I never did thought to found one so good wife. I did 'ave such estrange life. In those day when my father did fling away that graty name and cry ‘ I am *republicano* ! ’—in those day, when I did ride free upon that grandy lands, I never did thought. . . . My mother was daughter of one great chief. 'E was one vare large *Indio*. 'E did go down from that mountains into those beautiful Bolivia. There 'e did see one young girl most beautiful. 'E did love 'er when 'e did see 'er and 'e did steal 'er and carry off—off—up back to that mountain. She did 'ave one daughter when she die. My grandfather did love that daughter and did make 'er to be like one *princesa*. By-in-bye come one tall young nobly man, son of one rich *conde*, and fall in love with 'er. 'E marry 'er and take away. And I did born

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

of this. I did born there on those *frontera* of that beautiful Bolivia—I did lead one wildly life. I did take motch money and did go away to Europa and did gamb’—” His voice died off in a sigh.

“Try to sleep,” said Alma, in a tone of pure compassion. She began to feel now that the only real emotion left in the world was that of compassion.

But it seemed that he must go on recalling his life. “I did gamb’ and did do motch wickedness. I did forget ’ow that my mother, who was one angel, did say to my, ‘Rufino, never leave to pray and read in your ’oly book your prayers.’ And when so I did forget, motch had did come to my. I did know one woman—one *diablo Americano* that I did found in Paris. And she did try to make my love ’er. Many things she did do when I was sick ; vare well she did take care of my when I did ’ave one *fiebre*. And she did travel with my to this country. But she did think to make my married her. Then she did ’ate my. I fill vare surry, but she was one *diablo*. Now she is dead.”

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Again his voice died away in a sigh. But this time Alma did not respond. She was not asleep. She had heard all that he had said, and she felt herself growing numb and unable to speak. It seemed to her that for the first time in her life she had tasted actual anguish. There was a single question that seemed piercing her with its desire to be uttered: "How long ago was this . . . other woman?" But she could not utter it. Her power of utterance was gone. Cold, dumb, inert, she sat there, scarcely caring to breathe. She knew now that she had made some terrible mistake, from which there could be no receding—to which there could come no end but death. She heard the clock in the room adjoining strike three, and she was wide awake.

CHAPTER IX

A DAY OF REFLECTION

DA VEIGA was quite recovered by the following noon, and went down town in a cheerful mood. Immediately he had gone the Swedish girl came to give warning. She was obliged to leave in order to go and take care of a sick relative. The postman, she explained, had brought her a letter on the first delivery, before her mistress was up. Alma, in reply, requested only that she prepare luncheon before going. It did not surprise her as much as it might have surprised her the day before to hear that the maid had not received her wages for three months. She was fast becoming accustomed to queer things.

While having luncheon she resolved not to pay the girl, but to ask her to come back

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

that evening when Mr. da Veiga should be at home. At the last moment she changed her mind and decided that the girl might need money and she would give her at least a part of what was due. By three o'clock she was alone in the apartment. There was a cool and pleasant breeze from the west, and she thought it would be nice to go out for a walk. And then she remembered that da Veiga had said he should return early. She decided she would look through the servant's now unoccupied room and also the pantries. But this took only a short time. She stood looking out and down from the drawing-room window. She felt a sudden disgust for the house and wondered if there would not be time enough to slip out, get on a street-car and ride down as far as her old home. In all these days she had not ventured back to that neighborhood. Of course, her aunt was not in town, but merely to see the house once more would be a satisfaction. But da Veiga would come home early, and she must not be away. She opened the piano and tried to play, but her fingers

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

were stiff; the piano gave out a dull, perfunctory sound. She went back to the window, and looking into the street again, saw a woman, tall, slender, rather shabby, moving slowly along the opposite side. Her inactive mind considered the question irresolutely whether or not there were other women worse off than herself. Then her brain became possessed of one single agonizing, fascinating interrogation: "How long ago was that . . . other woman?" The horror of that thought was like a suffocating weight. More than once before da Veiga had left the house she had started to ask him—to beg him to tell her when—how long since—he had come from Europe with—that woman—the woman who had wanted him to marry her—who had loved him, probably. Each time she had felt herself grow pale. And now he was gone, and she could not ask him. She could only fall to thinking again about . . . if the woman had loved him. And from that to considering her own feeling for him—if it had been love—or affection . . . and what love was

Miss Splbester's Marriage

—and what affection—and what had brought about her . . . affection for him . . . or . . . or love? . . . She had not been attracted by his personality. The title she had made him promise to lay aside—she had not wanted American friends to ridicule them. She recalled again the days of the early Spring—the visit from her Aunt Ester, and especially the night at the Claytons', when da Veiga had stood bowing and bending over her chair and telling of his escape out of the Argentine. Incidents of the days that followed flashed back upon her—the afternoons in which he had called; the breaking of her aunt's tea-cup; the chance meeting in the Avenue and the untruths she had told about going at once to the country; her endeavor to get rid of the cup and saucer he had bought; her flight to the Dows'; the mocking laughter of the ragged urchin into whose hands she had thrust the offending china. And after that—another morning—was it not the very next?—when the sky was full of clouds and soft Spring rain was falling, and she, setting forth to the

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

shops to make purchases for her aunt, and turning the corner suddenly, fell almost into the arms of da Veiga. And his first question, that had caused her heart to swell up and choke her :

“Why you did give to one streety boy that cop which I did buy and bring to you?”

The consuming mortification of that moment, too intense for forgetting; the dumbness that had stricken her, the helplessness, the silence that had lasted until he had said: “You see, I understand. She make you to be one ’fred yong lady. That is it.”

She recalled his story of having followed her, having seen with his own eyes what she had done, and of having repurchased his spurned offering; and her continued, helpless silence that had seemed to create a sort of confidence between them; and next in the chain of events her attempt to atone for wounding his feelings by kind interest in what he had to say of himself and the gigantic enterprise in which he was engaged—the company which should send enormous

Miss Splvester's Marriage

vessels to the new South American pearl fisheries, the monopoly of which was in his hands as a government concession—his purpose to reap rich reward—millions—as his share ; and then—his plans to go back to South America.

She considered the growth of the strangely begotten confidence between them, which had led her to forget wholly how he had seemed to her at first ; the confidence which had seemed to efface recollection of his impressive peculiarities and of whatever amusement or ridicule they had excited formerly during his calls at her aunt's house ; which had seemed to foster indifference to the view her aunt or others might take of her encouragement of the friendship of this man, and which had seemed, on the whole, to yield a sort of consolation for real or fancied disappointments or repressions of the past ; the confidence which had caused her to return unmovedly the surprised glances of her friend, Alice Dow, who by chance had met her in da Veiga's company on the Avenue—the Dows not having yet gone to their country house

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

in the Orange Mountains; the enmeshing, engrossing confidence into which she had felt herself slipping under the power of his unfaltering devotion and her own restless desires.

However lighted by these swift flashes of recollection, her brain still felt sluggish and oppressed, and at the end recurred inevitably the same old torturing question as to the time when that other woman had troubled his existence. She tried to form an approximate idea. It could not have been the year previous, for then he was in South America, fighting in border wars. It could not have been the year before that. He had not been in Europe for five or six years, perhaps, except when on his way up from the Argentine—the roundabout route by which travelers usually came to the United States—in the February not yet six months past. It could not have been then, for he had not loitered in Paris. He had brought the Severino Gonzalez letter very speedily to her Aunt Ester. She remembered her Aunt Ester said so. Besides, he could not—no, he

Miss Splbester's Marriage

could not. . . . It was six years past, and the woman was dead and she must not be recalled. Five-year graves held only skeletons. She must forget.

Looking down into the street again she saw loitering there the woman she had seen some time before ; loitering and looking up at the building.

CHAPTER X

A MYSTERIOUS NOTE

IT occurred to her finally that it must be late and that, although she felt no sensation of hunger, it must be long past the dinner hour. Since dusk she had been lying on a small couch in the drawing-room bow window. Da Veiga had not come yet, although he had said particularly that he should be home early.

With a faint instinct of alarm she got up and lighted the gas, and at that moment was relieved to hear the apartment bell rung from the street entrance hall. As she went through to the kitchen to press the servant's button she noticed by the dining-room clock that it was midnight. The elevator had stopped running and da Veiga would have to climb to the fifth floor. It was his ring,

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

double and long continued. He had his key, but he wished to let her know that he had arrived and was ascending very slowly, sitting down at the foot of each flight to rest and recover his breath. She took matches and went into the passage to open the door leading to the outer hall, where, doubtless, the lights were low. As her hand turned the knob something on the carpet at her feet attracted her attention. She stooped and picked up a letter, which apparently had been slipped under the door. She went back, stood under the gas and read the address—"Mrs. da Veiga." The scratchy, almost trembling writing looked so out of place on the good, thick linen paper that it suggested the hand of a menial. She tore open the envelope with uncomfortable premonitory sensations; it must be that the Swedish servant was going to be disagreeably in haste about the balance due her. The contents were brief:

A lady who must see Mrs. da Veiga on a private and important matter will call to-morrow at three precisely, and would request

Miss Splvester's Marriage

Mrs. da Veiga to meet her at the entrance of her house. As a matter of justice to one of her own sex this note should not be mentioned to *any one* or *any one* be informed of the appointment.

And below, as an afterthought :

If this is mentioned to *any one* you may be prevented learning in time what you will later regret not having learned.

Refolding the sheet she placed it carefully in her bosom. She had read it twice, and now she heard da Veiga coming up the fourth and last flight. "*Hijo de—*" he was muttering thickly and breathlessly when he caught sight of her. "Why you did not go and esleep, poor my darling?" he inquired, with much solicitude, and closed the door behind him not too softly.

"You are very late," said Alma, with a queer catch in her throat. She was white and trembling from reading the anonymous note.

"I did want to come more early, and those peoples did make my stay." The

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

heavy cane he carried fell out of his hand as he entered the drawing-room. "You did eat well, *querida*?" he questioned, as he arranged his hat, his cigarette case, his watch and a large envelope of papers severally and consecutively along the top of the piano.

Alma fell back from the arm he extended to encircle her. She moved farther across the room and stood looking at him over a chair.

"You might have let me know your intention to spend the evening as you did," she said, in a high, strange voice.

Da Veiga wheeled, and into his eyes came a startled expression. Her own had a light in them he had not seen before. There was silence, then Alma spoke again :

"The servant left at three. I have been alone for nine long hours, and I have had no dinner. If you had not said positively that you would come early——"

"Why you did let that big Swedie go out?" he thundered, with sudden anger. Then his voice dropped. "Poor my dar-

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

ling! And you 'ave not eat? Come with my, *querida*; I make one fine *cena*. On those immortal field of battle, in those graty wars, man' times we soldiers build those fire and make that coffee. But frest I put my slippers and my dress' gown."

She lingered some moments after he had gone out to the kitchen, and heard him striking matches, searching the ice-box in the butler's pantry and banging the gas range with the tea-kettle and other utensils in untutored, masculine manner until, her resentment melting to amusement, she had to follow out.

A savory smell pervaded the place. Señor da Veiga was smiling at the results of his labors. Meat and drink were actually preparing, as at a magician's touch. It only remained to lay a cloth in the dining-room.

The amusement of da Veiga increased. "That Swedie 'ave no key," he said, after a bit, shaking with laughter. "She 'ave no key to ope' that door outside. She stay cry there all the night."

"Why, I thought you understood," said

Miss Splvester's Marriage

Alma. "She is not coming back. She gave warning. She went to take care of some one who is sick—a cousin. She told me you had not paid her—for three months—since she came to work. I gave her twenty-five dollars—" She broke off, annoyed at the thought of the anonymous letter.

Da Veiga's laughter ceased abruptly. "You did pay to 'er? You are one fool! What right she 'ad to go 'way?"

As Alma was silent he said no further word, and when they presently sat down to sup he seemed again in very good humor.

"Now, my darling, we eat. Though I come late, yet so we eat well. *Querida*, give to my the big what you call *faca*—I cut the steak. And while we eat I tell to you, my darling, 'ow those peoples did make my to stay there at Delmonico's until near eight, and then they did make my to go to the 'ouse of one judge that will to buy some stock in our companee yah. And there I talk to them like one *diablo*. To-day, *querida*, I 'ave take one office down town. I 'ave pay rent and buy carpet and desk and

Miss Splvester's Marriage

table and sofa. I 'ave spent motch money." He divided the steak slowly in two unequal portions, passed a plate to Alma and sighed. "To-morrow I did think to pay the rent, for we stay yet one month in this place. Then I did think for we go to Paris in that graty Exesposition. You see by those days my companee yah 'as begun; those ships 'ave gone to load with that beautiful concha—what you call *madreperla*. I close my office or I leave one boy. We go in that graty Fair." He got up and went to the ice-box for ice. "'Ere is vare warm," he said, and took his seat again, after emptying his glass. "'Ere is vare warm," he repeated, as he cut deeper into the larger portion of meat on his own plate. Alma, watching with fascinated eyes, wondered if it could be possible he had really tasted anything since morning. She made no movement to take food, but presently began to pour the coffee. After this she watched him again, until he caught her eye and shouted at her: "Why you not eat?" She started, and clasped her hands on her bosom. "What is that?" he demanded.

Miss Splvester's Marriage

"Something—nothing—a little pain," she stammered. "It seemed to stab me. It is gone." The sharp corner of the stiff envelope of the letter in her bosom had reminded her. Should she speak of it now or wait until morning?

He went on telling his plans. "To-morrow, *querida*, I must go early down town. I do motch business. I sell some shares of my stock. I am vare sad that I most sell that, but I most 'ave money for we pay expenses. You see I did put last month motch capital, I did exespend man' 'under' dollars. I did send man' cablegramas to South America. Gradill did I exespend to make sure my concession. Now I most sell. *Querida*, if you 'ave not give that ooglie Swedie those twenty-five dollars, I borrow from you and I borrow more seventy-five from one friend, one vare nice man, and so I 'ave not to sell that stock. But now it is too late." He reached for his coffee and put a great many lumps of sugar into the cup. "You did give to 'er all you did 'ave? Not is so, *querida*?"

Miss Splvester's Marriage

"Oh, there is a little car-fare left, perhaps ten dollars," said Alma, jerkily.

Da Veiga drew another deep sigh and kept silence. Alma, sipping her coffee, gazed at her plate. She felt too worn with the day's mental experiences to discuss any subject, momentous or trivial. As for the anonymous letter, there would be time enough in the morning. If the Swede had complaint to make, let her come in person and with less mystery.

"No," cried da Veiga, suddenly, and in a very resolute tone, "no, *querida*, I will not to take from you that little moneys. I sell my stock. Already I did borrow—'ow motch I did borrow, *querida*? When we did marry you did just 'ave receive your moneys. Not is so? One 'under' and fifty dollars! Now you will not 'ave more one 'under' and fifty until one month—maybe more long. Poor my darling! I fill shame I did borrow for we pay some bills." His plate was quite empty, and he reached for more coffee. "I go to get my cigarette 'older," he murmured, in melodious tones,

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

and rose rather heavily. But Alma did not stir. She seemed to find fascination in the plate before her. Perhaps she was considering the strangeness of this honeymoon. Da Veiga came back and sat leaning an arm on the table while he smoked and finished his coffee.

"To-day, my darling," he said presently, "I did pace by that 'ouse of your aunt. What fine 'ouse, and all shut up! I did think to myself what pity she is one such old *diablo*. *Querida*, why you don' try make frien'ship with your aunt, and so you get some moneys from 'er for we not sell our stock? *Querida*, I fill surry to sell those stock, which should be more thousands dollars. Your aunt is one rich woman—what she miss for give two 'under' fifty, maybe three 'under' or six 'under' dollars, and take your note? Not is so, *querida*? Then we go in that graty steamer next week."

It seemed to Alma she must be breathing very audibly. She had a feeling of extreme exhaustion. It seemed a tremendous effort to draw in her breath or expel it. To form

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

words was still more difficult. They fell slowly from her lips: "You say the house is shut. My aunt is away. It would be hard to communicate with her."

"Why you cannot write one letter?"

She moved back her chair sharply and rose. Standing so for an instant she caught sight of a white face and a white-gowned figure in the glass of the antique sideboard. The face, as colorless as the gown, had eyes more black and angry than she had ever seen. And it was her own face. "If I must borrow money," she said, in a voice that vibrated strangely, "it shall be from a stranger rather than from any relative." Then she went quickly from the room.

CHAPTER XI

STRANGE REVELATIONS

It was lacking a minute of three when she stepped from the elevator and went toward the street. The great entrance doors swung noiselessly before and after her. She lifted her eyes from the hem of her gray cloth gown where she fancied a stray thread had caught, and saw coming up the steps the woman she had seen from her drawing-room window the day before loitering on the opposite side and glancing up. She felt positive at once that this was the person.

“You were looking for me—for Mrs. da Veiga?” she said.

The woman had reached the top step and paused to breathe for a few seconds. Alma’s perceptions, quickened rather than sluggish, as on the previous afternoon, seized swiftly

Miss Splvester's Marriage

on certain points of her appearance. For one thing, the shabbiness of the woman now appeared more a shabbiness of gait and manner than of attire ; for another, her tall and somewhat angular form was plainly quivering with excitement and vindictive purpose ; so plainly, indeed, that the answer she presently gave seemed mild unto falsity : " I was looking for a lady of that name."

" Will you come up to my apartment ?" said Alma, more coldly. " I am quite alone."

No further words passed between them until they had gone up in the elevator and Alma had led the way to her drawing-room. The woman did not sit at once. She walked over to the bow window, stood there, and holding up a pair of eyeglasses that hung on a cord round her neck, took a long look at a crayon portrait of da Veiga above the piano. Then she sat down on the little sofa.

" You have no idea, I suppose, what I wish to speak to you about ?" she began, in a slow, hard voice, as if she were arming herself with insolence now that she had gained entrance and audience.

Miss Splvester's Marriage

Alma's reply was not of a kind to encourage. "I presume it was you who wrote to me. I suppose it is something about the servant that left yesterday. Of course, as she gave no notice——"

The woman threw out one long arm with a gesture of contempt approaching coarseness. "Your servant!" she cried. "You kept a servant! Well, I wonder who paid her! About a servant, eh. Do you know who I am? I am a victim—a dupe——" she sprang to her feet and flung out her other arm toward the picture over the piano—"the dupe—one of the dupes of that—that scoundrel! And you—you are another."

Alma sat very still in the large arm-chair—da Veiga's favorite chair—at the opposite side of the room. She was conscious presently, of an arranged feeling, stiff and woodenish, such as she had felt as a child in a photograph gallery posing for her picture. She was cold, too; her hands were quite cold and her whole body seemed transfixed. It was like a nightmare she had experienced once, when she wanted to speak, to move, to cry

Miss Splvester's Marriage

out, and yet could not. She remembered that she had known that was a nightmare, and had seen with open eyes all objects in the room just as she now saw the veriest unimportant things—the thread on the bottom of her gown which she had meant to pick off down in the entrance hall; the spot that might be ink—or wine on her cuff; the atom of dust on the glass of the tiny watch in her parasol handle. And then she heard the woman's voice again, this time less strident.

“I don't wish to get excited; I generally know how to control my feelings. And besides, you are to be pitied as much as any one. If you thought you were not married you'd be sorry at first, perhaps; but after a while you might be sorrier if you really were tied to him. I don't know if that's any consolation. In any case, our positions are about equal. For, even if that woman he represented to me to be in Europe had died before the church ceremony at All Asphodels', my interests as common-law wife will be protected. The law is just. He never

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

once gave up his home with me. On the night of that wedding he was with me."

She paused as if expecting the girl to cry out. But Alma neither spoke nor stirred. Her pale face was expressionless. And the other went on, with a contraction of the mouth muscles and a moistening of her parched lips: "Yes, on the night of that wedding. Of course, I only knew what he told me when he came in—came home at seven. Said a cousin of his—a second cousin, who happened to be a namesake—had arrived in this country and had married an heiress. He had met him at the Consulate, and it had been a great surprise. He had had to go to the church and a wedding breakfast afterward, and he had kissed the bride, though she was nothing as to looks. He told what they had eaten and drunk at the breakfast and everything else to me, and said he hadn't enjoyed it without me. He had wished I was there, and was so glad to get home and take off his coat and drink coffee. He would spend the evening quietly with me, from seven till

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

nearly eleven ; then he had promised to go and sleep at the apartment his cousin had taken and furnished, while the bridal couple went to Washington on their wedding trip. He was kinder and more affectionate than usual, and kept talking about our being married by a minister in the Fall. He never left me until eleven ; then he was sleepy and tired, and grumbled because he had to get up from the bed where he was having a nap so comfortably and go out again. It is hard for me to imagine what excuse a man could possibly make to a bride for such an absence at such a time or for returning in such a temper."

She laughed, and the laugh was not a good one to hear. The sound jarred on Alma with such force as partially to break the nightmare spell and restore power of utterance. "Who are you?" she asked, faintly.

"Who am I?" the woman cried, with fresh fury. "Who am I? I am the woman that found him sick and starving in Paris, that nursed him through a long, ter-

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

rible fever ; that never left him night or day ; that came back to New York in the steerage—you hear?—the *steerage* of the ship, in order to have money to bring him with me ; the woman that he vowed by his dead mother's grave to honor and protect. You want to know my name ? It is Barbara—he calls me Bébé—well, just as much Barbara da Veiga as yours is Alma da Veiga.” Again she paused and seemed to expect some outburst, but none came. “That's the name I'm known by over there in Twenty-fourth street,” she went on. “They pronounce it Veega. That was his home there with me, in Twenty-fourth street, near Eighth avenue. Perhaps you know the neighborhood. It is quiet and decent ; there are theatrical people, but not the bad kind. He lived there until this marriage—*of his cousin*—a few weeks ago. After that he explained to me he would have to sleep at their apartment—so that they might be able to testify to his blameless character when he began his suit against his first wife in the Autumn. But he spent

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

his afternoons and evenings at home as usual. It was comfortable—he liked to be there. I got home as early as I could. We had two large rooms on the second floor—it is a furnished-room house. In the front room are his desk and the sofa, and there is a large alcove off with the bed. In the back room we had a table and a gas stove. Between the rooms are two closets with running water and an ice-box. Two people can live very comfortably in that way. I had the walls all covered with pretty pictures. Then it was very convenient—the running water and all. One could save a great deal by washing handkerchiefs and small things. That night after he had gone—that *wedding* night—I felt so lonely I stayed up till two o'clock, and washed and ironed so many little articles for him." Yet again she paused and waited—and went on: "It was mere chance that my suspicions were aroused by a man following him there to collect a bill—rent, for this very apartment, too. I happened to be at home. I am a forewoman. Two people have two

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

mouths to feed, and there are clothing and other expenses. I was home, and the man let out something about being tired of calling and being put off by da Veiga or told that he wasn't at home. 'In a few days,' he said, 'if that rent isn't paid you will get notice to vacate.' Nine hundred a year! A good rent for a man without a penny of income! You see now his true character."

Alma leaned forward and cried out—a queer, guttural, gasping cry. Then she found she could speak.

"I wish," she said, distinctly, "that you would leave this room at once. I have read of such creatures as you—and their lies."

The other woman sprang to her feet, hesitated and sat down again. "I am not going yet. There is more for you to hear, and you had better hear it."

Alma had turned her face away; she turned it back now and looked at this other—this angular, flaxen-haired, keen-eyed woman with large nose and pale lips, who had come with him from Europe, who had found him starving and dying, who had nursed

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

him through terrible illness, who had traveled in the steerage, who had been with him for four long hours on his wedding night. A great chill was beginning to shake her. She remembered so well his absence during those hours—how he accounted for it by the story of a countryman, recently arrived, who could speak no English, who had been arrested by mistake, and had sent for him to get him liberated; how he had returned at eleven, how strange and indifferent his conduct had been, and how he had let her retire and sat smoking his cigarettes long after midnight on his wedding night! The chill shook her from head to foot. She remembered the story of Don Ernesto, who had married the daughter of the President of a republic in South America—the gossip about his spending his wedding night with the Indian woman, Maria, and her children, and his having married Doña Elvira merely to stand firm with her father and succeed him in the Presidency—the story that had seemed so detestable to her innocent wisdom and wise innocence of fifteen. The chill was

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

followed by a sort of moral nausea, in some great spasm of which she felt that she might easily eject the heart from her body.

"The sooner you know all the truth the better," the woman persisted; "the main thing is, where is that first wife?"

"Whom—what do you mean by 'first wife?' " asked Alma, in a thick voice.

"I mean the Englishwoman he married a few years ago in London. She owned some property, but she was shrewd. What did she want with a penniless adventurer whose only occupation was flirtations with other women? She left him, you understand. Nobody cared for him—nobody wanted him. That was how I had pity for him. I thought he would reform and make a good Christian man if he had a chance. It wasn't that I wanted any one's husband. He was alone, adrift in the world. I gave him shelter and help. Has any one but me a right to him? Has any one else done as much for him? Has he got any money out of you yet—or out of your relatives? You are the heiress, I suppose. Perhaps he has

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

tried and not succeeded. As for that other woman—he has her picture somewhere here in this very apartment. He told me that he hated her so that he spat on her portrait and cut it with a knife, and finally put his own in front of it in the same frame. I think it is that one on the piano. Do you mind if I take it down and see if it is there?”

“Why should I mind what you do?” asked Alma, in the same thick voice, and shivering as she spoke.

The woman looked round the room. “I can stand on that thing; I suppose it’s the piano stool,” she said, in a matter-of-fact way; “I am tall enough.”

Still Alma did not move. Her white face was turned toward the other, who had climbed up and was leaning over against the piano top and lifting the heavy frame. The wire fell easily from the gilt hook on the moulding. “It will take only a moment to see,” she said, and as she spoke she knelt on the Indian rug before the piano, pulling the little nails from the back of the frame. The

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

board fell out softly on the rug, and following the board came a picture that was not the crayon of da Veiga. It was an old-fashioned photograph enlarged in water-colors. She held it up triumphantly.

"You see how he cut and gashed it," she said. "But it is the woman—his wife. On the bottom of it, here, is the name, Maria da Veiga. Do you want to look at it closer? What's the matter? You ain't fainting, are you?"

Alma's head had fallen back in the chair. Her face was pallid and her eyes closed. "No," she said, feebly, "I am not—fainting. But—I see no good in discussing—these matters. I shall be glad if you will excuse me now." She got up as she spoke the last word, staggered into the bedroom and fell on the bed. Her hat fell off, and she sat up again, holding her parasol tightly, like a drunken person who would not give up. She heard the woman putting up the picture. And after what might have been seconds or moments or hours, for all that she could tell, she heard her ask if she wanted a glass of

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

water or brandy or anything. And after another indefinite period she heard the outer door of the apartment close with a loud sound.

She sat up in a sort of ringing silence and listened as if afraid the woman might return. After a little she got off the bed and looked out into the drawing-room ; the picture hung in its accustomed place, and she wondered if it could all have been an ugly dream. She advanced a few steps and saw on the rug slivers of wood that had come from the board back of the picture, together with two small nails. Stooping, she picked up these and carried them out to the kitchen. Then she came back, took a long look round the room and fell to the floor by the little sofa.

CHAPTER XII

A NIGHT OF TRIAL

SHE was walking faster than she had ever before walked in her life. She had put on her sailor hat again, which had fallen off when she fell on the bed, and she carried the parasol with the watch in the handle. It was after six, and the last train by which she might have gone to seek her aunt at the seaside had left at half-past four. She was not sure what she meant to do, except that she would not pass the night in the apartment. She thought she would go to a hotel. But first she would make certain that the woman had told the truth. She would go to Twenty-fourth street and find the place.

Her entire body seemed on fire. She felt like one floating through a field of flame. If the woman had spoken untruths—but

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

there were such horrid symptoms of truth ! The wedding night, the coming from Europe, the defaced picture back of his own picture ! How could that woman have invented suggestions about his trying to get money from—her relatives ? It seemed to her that she flew on her way in a sort of sirocco. It was a close, humid August night, but she was hot with dry fever heat—the suffocating heat of anger, bitter, impotent, raging anger, like that of a child locked in a room. Where was he at that moment ? Was he over there in Twenty-fourth street—with the very woman who had denounced him ? Why had she not made the woman say if she still intended to—protect and succor him ? She flew on across the square, across Broadway. She did not know or care whether she passed one person or a thousand persons. She was soon in Twenty-fourth street, a street of queer inhabitants. The sidewalks were crowded with loiterers, but she saw none clearly. Under the elevated railway and on through the next block and on into the next she flew. And there she stopped, suddenly

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

remembering the woman had not told her the house number. She must inquire at every door in the block. She leaned against a railing for a moment, then went on, then stopped again. On the opposite side, farther down, almost at the end, coming slowly along, pausing, turning, ascending the steps, opening the door with a latchkey, she saw da Veiga. There was no mistaking his figure and carriage.

At that instant she felt as if her body were being compressed in one of those old sixteenth-century instruments of torture that she had seen in pictures.

After a long while she went on across the block, looking up at the second-story windows of that house, with their old-fashioned green slat shutters. She got aboard a car, and by-and-by saw that she was at Fifty-ninth street near the Park. Alighting, she went into the Park. It was still quite light. She walked through to Fifth avenue and kept on eastward. Before long she found herself on the elevated railway, riding southward again. She rode to the end, got

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

off and took a boat that went some place where it was brighter and noisier than at the South Ferry. She came back in the same boat and traveled up to Forty-second street. The next she knew she was at the Grand Central Station, caught in a swarming crowd that had just come from some train.

The stream swirled her over across the street to a hotel entrance, and she went in and up to the parlor. While the boy had gone to get a card for her to register she sat where she could see herself in a mirror. Through all her mental confusion the instinct of gentility impressed her with the necessity that her hat should be properly adjusted, her hair neatly arranged and her expression composed. The flush in her face was but natural in the intense Midsummer heat. Other instincts—largely of self-preservation, perhaps—caused her to write her name "Mrs. A. Sylvester" and for address merely "City."

The room assigned her was small, with one window giving on an inner court. It was not very high up, and kitchen sounds ascended incessantly. The heat was great.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

She had an idea that if she turned out the gas, removed her clothing and lay down on the bed she might feel calmer. The night was before her in which to think out what to do and prepare herself to do it. Thus far she saw but one course—to confront him with what she had heard and insist on knowing the truth. Had he ever married any other woman? Who and what was Maria da Veiga? What rights, if any, had Barbara da Veiga? Was there such a person as Alma da Veiga? These questions must all be settled. Until she had his reply to them she would do nothing rash. She was glad there had been no train to the seaside. She felt that she did not wish to go to her aunt until she had heard his answer. In the morning she would go back to the apartment and confront him—"confront" was precisely the word. It gave her a sense of resoluteness to repeat it. She wished she could sleep all night and waken strong and composed in the morning, but the heat was intolerable. She tossed from side to side as the hours wore on toward midnight, and wondered if he had yet

Miss Splvester's Marriage

arrived at the apartment and found her gone. She wondered what he would do ; would he make any outcry—ask any questions of any one ? Would he have already been told by the woman Barbara that Alma had learned such things from her ? Would he be waiting her return ? Would he go out to look for her ? What would he say in the morning when she returned ? What should she first say to him ? Suppose he should break down and confess that this horrible thing was true—that he had been married before and that his wife was in Europe ? What must she do then ? Must she go to her Aunt Sevenbanks—or first to a lawyer ? Should she ask for a divorce or for an annulment of her marriage ? How could it be kept secret ? How could the frightful and intolerable vulgarity of newspaper publicity be avoided ? How could she escape seeing her name in print ? Would the lawyer advise her to go to Dakota ? She closed her eyes and breathed hard. If sleep would only come !

With her eyes shut she seemed to see everywhere the letter “ D ” blazing at her—

Miss Splvester's Marriage

and sometimes the word "Dakota," and sometimes the word "divorce." Once worn to exhaustion she seemed to have sunk out of the heat into darkness—the darkness of a cool and illimitable tropical wood. She was a child again, lost in that equatorial forest as once when she was five years old. And Pepe and Chavela, the servants, were searching as then for her, half-crazed at their own negligence. And she was afraid of the darkness and was praying, as she had often heard Chavela pray to the Holy Virgin, to bring some one to find her ; and a huge form came out of the shadow of a tree, a horrible shape of wild beast lifting a tremendous paw like a bear's with which to fell her to the ground ; and the head seemed to turn strangely familiar, and the eyes became da Veiga's eyes. And she awoke, gasping.

She lay down again, for it was only two o'clock by the parasol watch. Other little intervals of dozing came to her. Sometimes she saw the interior of those Twenty-fourth street rooms. Da Veiga was there at ease in slippers and smoking jacket. The woman,

Miss Splvester's Marriage

Barbara, was darning socks for him. Sometimes she was in a court of law, with greedy eyes devouring her, newspaper artists sketching her, a lawyer questioning her, and the judge's voice, deciding deliberately, and in a tone that terrified her: "The marriage is null and void." Sometimes she saw her Aunt Sevenbanks, bowed, silent, overwhelmed with disgrace. Then the woman Barbara would reappear, tall, angular, keen-eyed and large-nosed, resolute and self-justifying. "Who else wanted him? I succored him. Who else had a right to him?" Sometimes huge heads seemed thrusting themselves against her, half-human, with under lips distorted by inserted bits of stone or bone. And a hoarse whisper, issuing from nowhere, yet everywhere, proclaimed, "The Bugres—that live on their fellow-men—the devourers of their kind—the Bugres." And again she was sinking in dark waters over which black boats were floating, with white sails made from huge newspapers printed in enormous type, with the words "Dakota" and "divorce" everywhere.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Toward daybreak she might have slept an hour or two, dreaming then a curious medley of comedy and tragedy in which her Aunt Ester and her Aunt Sevenbanks, da Veiga and Barbara, herself and the Swedish servant were paired in a sort of procession, until running toward them at great speed came the woman of the gashed portrait, wringing her hands and sobbing that her face had been destroyed. Then Alma sat up in bed and looked at the window. It was daylight, and an unbearable clatter of dishes came up from the restaurant kitchen. She reached for the parasol and saw that it was six o'clock. She rose and dressed. She had no comb or brush, but smoothing the sides of her hair with her hands she found that her hat would cover the worst of her disarray. Her face looked swollen even after much cold water, but she took special pains with her collar and cuffs. The servants were astir in the halls, but she met no one else as she went out. She knew that the outside doors of the apartment house would be open, and if the elevator were not yet running, so much the

Miss Splvester's Marriage

better. She could enter unobserved and walk up-stairs. The morning air was cool and refreshing, and her strength and courage returned.

She ran up the stairway so lightly that she was hardly out of breath at all when she opened the apartment door with her key and walked down the passage. The gas was burning, as it had probably burned all night, in the drawing-room. In the dining-room the rising sun was glaring on everything, and full in the glare, at the table, in his accustomed place, with a cup of black coffee before him and his cigarette holder in his mouth, in *négligé*, as usual, and smoking and shedding slow tears, sat da Veiga. He sat still and looked at her; then suddenly he uttered a loud wail of interrogation:

“With what man you did go ’way?”

CHAPTER XIII

ALMA CONFRONTS HER HUSBAND

SHE crossed the room and sat down facing him. Her glance then fell on another object—his razor, half-open, on the table—and her first words were commonplace. “You were going to shave?”

He answered with the cigarette-holder in his mouth: “I did think to cut my throat; then I did think to wait and see.” He drew a sobbing breath. “I never did think my wife to go and leave my.”

“When you say ‘wife,’” said Alma, with a composure that was like a numbness, “to whom do you refer? Myself, or one of the other two? Is it Barbara—or is it the woman whose picture is in there?”

Da Veiga seemed not to have understood. He gazed at her with eyes in which a dark flame was kindling.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

“ You look vare fine,” he said, with a dull sort of fury ; “ vare nice you look, with that white, small 'at and those red mouth. Nice little parasol with one watch—all so fine. Why did you come back ? ” The fury increased.

“ Why did you come back ? ” he shouted, with a look of hatred.

“ You have not answered my question,” said Alma, ignoring his temper. “ Perhaps you did not understand me—it is foolish to say insulting things. You know perfectly well why I left this house last night and went alone to a hotel. The woman who calls herself Barbara da Veiga must have told you she was here yesterday afternoon and that she informed me I was not your wife. You could not expect me to remain after that. I had not intended to return, but it seemed only right to give you a chance to defend yourself. In any event, it will be for my lawyer to look into the matter at once. The record of any marriage between yourself and the Maria da Veiga whose portrait hangs behind your own——”

Miss Splvester's Marriage

He sprang up with an imprecation. "Who did tell to you——?"

"She says you call her Bébé——"

"That *diablo*! Oh——" He fell into his seat again. "*Querida*, I did wish to confess all to you. I did tell to you 'ow she will that I marry with 'er and 'ow she try to make my live always with 'er. I did tell to you that she care for my when I 'ave one *fiebre* and did come with my from Paris. I 'ave try so 'ard to break from 'er—I 'ave give 'er money—vare motch moneys 'ave I give. All that I can do to 'er for make we separate good friends. Still, she is one *diablo*. She write to my, she come, she 'ang on my back. Now she try for make my wife to leave my. I did tell to 'er long months past, when we did come in that graty ship, I did tell to 'er I cannot marry with 'er. I did tell 'er one lie——'ow I did 'ave already one wife. I did show to 'er one picture of one lady in that Argentine—one lady did marry with my cousin. I did say that was my wife, Maria. *Querida*, I am one poor man, vare sad, with motch troubles. I did try so 'ard, and I did

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

think she let my be. She is one old woman, with one big nose ; vare ooglie is she, and I never did love 'er. Man' letters I receive from 'er and she baig and baig I go there. I go yesterday and she say she go 'way—in Europa, and she want money. I 'ave to give to 'er motch money. Now I am poor—I need for we pay exespenses. 'Ow I can give to 'er that money for to go in Europa? ” Fresh tears came to his eyes. “ All I 'ave pray for in this world is for we live 'appy and good. I did tell you, *querida*, 'ow I did do motch wickedness, and now I do no more. Last night I did read in my *libro de devociones*, as my mother did tell to me, and I did pray to 'eaven to bring back my wife.”

Alma rose and went into the drawing-room and turned out the gas. He followed and watched her. She went on into the bedroom, took off her hat and the bodice of her dress and put on a dressing sacque, then began to comb her hair. He followed and sat on the bed. “ You will not speak to my, *querida*? ” he inquired, piteously.

“ I have nothing to say just at present,”

Miss Splvester's Marriage

she answered, and went on combing her hair. She was not quite sure what she thought of his explanations. She was still suffering moral nausea, though not as intensely as the day before. One of the two had told falsehoods ; there was untruth on one side or the other, even if the tragic aspect were eliminated and his fault reduced to a simple, ugly intrigue of the past with the woman Barbara. She felt a natural hatred for this woman, who had caused her such night-long suffering, and still her sense of justice framed excuses for the poor creature.

"I am vare sad, *querida*," said da Veiga, mournfully, "that I did tell to you one lie."

"*One* lie?" She gave the numeral emphasis. She was still brushing her hair. It seemed to her there had never been so many tangles in it. She turned to look at him.

"I did tell to you that she was dead. I am vare sad. I should tell to you she write to my and worry my man' times. Now you will not believe. But I prove to you."

"Yes," said Alma, "I shall require proof."

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

She felt a sort of regret that she could be so unmoved ; she knew from this that she had no love, nothing but pity for him. " I shall require proof," she repeated, " that I have a right to remain here ; proof that you never have married any other woman. You must satisfy me of that." She had finished brushing her hair, and was coiling it at the back of her head. " You might pour me a cup of coffee," she added.

Da Veiga got up from the bed and preceded her back to the dining-room. She saw that he still carried the razor with him, and remarked that he would better put it away unless he meant to shave at once.

Two hours later she sat alone again. He had gone down town to try to realize something on his pearl fishery concession stock. He had reiterated his sore need of money for current expenses and also to give the woman, so that she would go abroad and leave them in peace.

Alma sat reflecting and trying to decide on a course of action. Should she try to get an advance from the lawyer—her aunt's

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

man of business—who had charge of her own small quarterly income? Supposing she obtained sufficient for the woman, Barbara—she wondered how much would be required. A queer pity was in her heart for da Veiga, inspired in great measure by his financial distress. It seemed to her that however great his fault, she could not desert him just now.

With a sudden sensation of exhaustion she lay down and slept. She did not wake until he came home.

CHAPTER XIV

A TALK WITH MR. TRAVIS

SHE had once before had occasion to go alone to call on the lawyer, whose office was in lower Broadway. That other time she had been driven down in her aunt's coupé—it was Winter—and she had had only to go up in the elevator and send in her card to Mr. Travis. This time there was no coupé, but a tiresome walk from the City Hall station. The trucks and the cable-cars were thick, and the men on the sidewalks jostled and elbowed her, and were altogether brutes. She felt flushed and cross by the time she reached the office. But Travis having not yet returned from luncheon, she had to wait awhile in his private room, and when he finally arrived she was much cooler. He was a tall, lank man with a beard and a

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

melancholy smile, but he sighed contentedly like one of honest intentions.

"Good morning, Miss Sylves—oh, I beg your pardon, you married a Spaniard—de—de——"

"South American," she corrected. "My name is da Veiga."

He smiled tranquilly. "Rather informal, though, wasn't it? I mean, you didn't go in for any of the fashionable nonsense that uses up so much money these hard times."

"Quite true," she answered, with calm indifference. "Speaking of money, Mr. Travis, that is what I came down for. I want some—ahead of time, you know; that is, if I can get it."

The lawyer lifted his eyebrows. "Why—" he said, in a vague tone.

"It can be managed in some way, can't it?" she insisted with a little impatience. "You see, if one wanted to go over to Paris, for example, it would cost a trifle. Señor da Veiga," she colored slightly, "has not much to spare just now. He is engrossed heart and soul and pocketbook in the new

Miss Splvester's Marriage

company he has organized. A pearl fishery company, you know. It is going to be a great——”

“ Pearl fishery? Where? ” The lawyer was interested.

“ Why, South America—an island off the coast—he came to New York to form the company.”

“ Incorporated? ” the gentleman inquired. She hesitated. “ I believe so.”

Mr. Travis leaned his elbow on his desk and rested his face on his palm. He regarded her with eyes of mild scrutiny. “ Well, then,” he observed, “ you didn’t do so badly, after all, did you? I had an idea you married one of those—well, usual foreign counts, you know. There *was* a title, wasn’t there? ”

“ Señor da Veiga inherits a title,” said Alma, with a little girlish stiffness. “ But he is an ardent republican. We never use it. Count Geraldina is the title,” she added.

“ Geraldina.” The lawyer repeated the name in a meditative way. The melancholy expression unhidden by his beard gave no

Miss Splvester's Marriage

clue to his thoughts. He might have been considering irrelevant questions, or he might have been smiling inwardly at the symptoms so familiar to the practiced eye and ear, so misleading to others. He could have told of so many cases where the devotion was most aggressively apparent, the attachment most strenuously insisted on, the excess—or access—of loyalty most vividly displayed on the very eve of the tragic *dénouement*—of the skeleton's discovery. "Well," he said, suddenly, "and you want some money to waste in Paris? By the way, I haven't inquired how Mrs. Sevenbanks is—and that reminds me, I have a letter here for you, from Paris, I think. It has been here some time." He got up and went to a small safe. Alma kept silence until he had finished with the combination. Then she said, frankly enough, "You know my Aunt Sevenbanks did not approve of my marriage, and I have not seen her since that time. She is at the seashore, I suppose."

He closed the safe, came back and handed her a letter. The blood crept into her face

Miss Splvester's Marriage

at the superscription. "From my aunt, Mrs. Harding—addressed to my maiden name—I suppose she forgot—she must have heard—with your permission." She tore open the envelope nervously. There were but a few lines in the neat Spanish hand, assuring "dearest Alma" that if she felt like coming across to join the writer she would be most welcome at any instant, and to be sure to write. But there was also a draft for a hundred and fifty dollars. "Perhaps after all I shall not need the advance I came to ask for," said Alma, showing him the draft.

He cleared his throat. "Now that was thoughtful of her. But this pearl fishing company that you spoke of. I wonder if I know any of the men in it. Who are the directors? I suppose it is no secret."

Alma remembered there was a Mr. Deane.

"Not Wilson Deane? I know him well. But he has been in Europe these eight or ten months, at the baths—I forget which. It must be some other."

"No," she said, a little irritably, "I am

Miss Splvester's Marriage

sure it is Wilson Deane. And there is a Mr. Shellingworth and George Stone——”

“George Stone? I know him, too. Funny how quiet it has been kept! I generally hear a good deal about such things. The newspapers haven't got on to it.”

“I don't know—I never read newspapers,” said Alma. “They make one's arms ache so to hold them.”

He laughed. “A new objection. I thought you were going to say they print such horrid crimes.” His pensive gaze followed her movements reluctantly as she got up to go. “I am glad to have had the pleasure of seeing you and giving you that letter, and also to have learned about the—the enterprise that Señor da Veiga—is that right? I never can pronounce Spanish——”

“That's right,” said Alma, with a smile that was not by any means care-free. He let her out direct by the private door and went back to his desk. Alone in the hall and unobserved, she stooped to refasten a shoelace. On her way to the elevator she had to pass the open door of the larger office. Travis

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

was there talking with another gentleman, not his partner. They were laughing, with unlighted cigars in their mouths. She wondered a little that the lawyer would care to talk freely with a man who kept his hat on and tipped it over on one side and used coarse language. "Hang it, Travis," she heard him say, "I tell you I never heard of the fellow or any such scheme. I believe it's all a fake."

She had to hurry to reach the bank before three o'clock. The teller knew her and there would be no delay. From the very instant of possessing the draft she had been resolved on a certain course—to go to the woman Barbara and offer her a hundred dollars with which to go abroad, and to give the other fifty to da Veiga. He had said that fifty would see him through until he got another remittance from South America—his coffee money. The only thing for their peace of mind, he had convinced her, was to have the woman Barbara on the other side of the ocean.

CHAPTER XV

“DIABLO!”

It was hardly four when she reached Twenty-fourth street. The servant who opened the door said that “Mrs. Veega” would soon be home, and there was a parlor to wait in. Alma had waited nearly an hour when the front door opened and the fair-haired Amazon came in.

“I wish to see you,” said Alma, stepping into the hall. “May I go up-stairs with you?” It flashed on her how oddly their positions were reversed since that other afternoon. But she was so full of her own plan that she did not mind.

“Oh, it’s you?” The woman paused on the staircase. “Come up,” she said, authoritatively.

When the door was closed Alma looked

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

round the room. Everything was as it had been described to her : the desk, the alcove, the bed, the closets and the ice-box. Da Veiga's silver-handled umbrella stood in a corner. Under the desk was a pair of enormous slippers. This gave her a shock. There were pictures on the wall. The doors were open through to the other room, where were the dining-table and the gas stove. Everything was true.

Alma coughed faintly, to gain time. She lacked words for a beginning. The purse in her hand, in which she had separately the fifty and the hundred dollar rolls, felt a clumsy, brazen thing.

"I wondered," said Barbara, after her caller was seated, "how you treated him that night when he went back to your apartment." She smiled grimly. "He was here till quite late. I said nothing until he was leaving. Then I said, 'Yes, go to the other one now. Perhaps she'll give you a warmer reception—when she knows about your first marriage and what you owe to me.' He only laughed and answered, 'Bébé, you

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

know well before God we are 'onorable. Not long off we marry in church. Then we live 'appy. Bébé, you are my all ; you will not forsake my.' He did not come yesterday. I was afraid at moments that—that he might have killed you. The pistol is here, but then he had the razor."

Alma trembled for an instant. "Why should he harm me?" she asked. "I have never thought of being afraid. Besides, he gave me a satisfactory explanation."

"He gave you an explanation!" the other repeated, in a tone of amazement. "He told you—the first wife—is dead?"

Alma felt herself suffocating. She had gone beyond her depth—the water was closing over her head. She had not stopped to think of what she must say. Now she saw that the woman would demand to know all. How could she tell her there had never been any other wife—that he had invented a previous marriage story—that he—! There was nothing she could say. She paused and stammered: "I—am his legal wife ; I—claim no other right—I have no doubt your

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

moral claim is as strong. But you have turned against him, and my duty seems plain. I must not desert him—it is not a question of love. I made a mistake and I must bear the consequences. You hate him and want to be free from him. I do not blame you, for he has acted wickedly toward you. It is no wonder you call him scoundrel and want to be far away from him. He told me of your wish to go to Europe, and I found I could help you a little—so I came.” The words formed themselves with difficulty, and the purse seemed more brazen and shamelessly thick than before. “I came to bring you the money. It isn’t much—a hundred dollars. You can go very nicely for eighty, I think. It is only giving you back a little of your own, you know—of what you have expended for him in the past, I mean. There is no use of trying to palliate his fault—no use even to discuss it. I shall only try to do my duty.”

The woman had stood up and was looking down on her. “He told you—that I—wished to go to—Europe?” she repeated,

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

slowly, with a faint, pale smile. "And that—I wanted money—to go——"

Alma also rose. "Yes, he told me." She opened the purse and took out the larger roll. "I shall have more in a month," she said. "If I knew where to send it—I want to feel that you will not be in need. There are steamers to-morrow and Saturday." She held out the bills with an impulsive gesture.

The other fell back a step. "You come here to offer me money?—" there was a grinding sound in her utterance—"to offer me money?—" the reddish down on her cheeks and her reddish eyebrows stood out queerly over her dead-white face—"money to go to Europe? You, who haven't the shadow of right to the name of wife—come to buy me off—me who support him, who put bread in his mouth, life in his body—me who went to you and told you the truth as a friend and as woman to woman—you offer me money? I spit on your money and on you! I fling it back in your face—I defy you—I despise you—I drive you from my sight!"

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

The next that was clear to Alma's comprehension she was in the street, a block away from the place. She was running quite fast—in one hand her purse, in the other the roll of bills. There was a pain in her shoulder and through her chest. The woman had struck her—had struck her a hard blow in that whirlwind of fury—the creature had actually struck her. The creature—Rufino was right—she was a *diablo*, and worse. Perhaps he was not so greatly at fault, after all. All this was vague and but half-acknowledged in her thoughts. She knew she had made some blunder in going there. “The creature would have taken the money from *him*,” she said to herself. “It was only because it was I. I was stupid—terribly stupid not to have foreseen. My shoulder—she struck me with her clenched hand—I shall remember.”

She had recovered from her dazed condition by the time she arrived at the apartment. Da Veiga was already there. She found him in the dining-room, smoking and

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

drinking black coffee. "Where you did go, my love?" he asked, looking up at her with bloodshot eyes.

"To the lawyer," she answered, after a moment of thought.

"You did get no money?" There was evidence of great strain in his voice.

"My Aunt Ester sent me a little. If it will be of any use, Rufino, I have fifty dollars."

He fell forward on his knees at her feet. "Oh, my love, you save my life! I was near to despair. That man—my friend, 'e did go 'way; until two weeks 'e stay. My love, my own true wife!"

She handed him the purse; she had withheld the hundred-dollar roll and placed it in her pocket. She made no mention of it. Other emergencies might confront them, she now felt, and she desired to be prepared. After a little she saw da Veiga putting on his coat to go out, and she offered no word to stay him. She imagined he was going to take the money to that woman. Perhaps the woman would accept it from *him*. Per-

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

haps she would go to Europe, after all—or elsewhere. At any rate, there was nothing further Alma could think to do. She felt she was powerless and must merely let things happen.

CHAPTER XVI

A PARTY OF SEVEN

FILMY golden light steeped the level lands about the little railway station as a chattering party of seven descended from the parlor car. It was a good half-mile to the hotel, and the hotel stage seemed at first glance inadequate. Yet laughingly, as the train pulled away and left them, the new-comers moved toward this smaller vehicle. A short, dark man, very correct in dress, escorted a stout lady of middle age and good-natured expression ; two young ladies, one much fairer than the other, but clearly sisters ; a youth, as precise in apparel as the gentleman ahead ; finally another lady, in whose face a certain youthfulness lingered, accompanied by a gentleman of thirty or more, tall in figure and quiet mannered. The first and

Miss Splvester's Marriage

second couples conversed in words entirely unintelligible to the natives ; the three that followed spoke English. The youth, who had a downy mustache and resembled his good-natured mamma, lingered back with the others. " Well," he remarked, " this is all your doing, Mrs. Harding. We start for Saratoga, where we have many times found pleasure, and we find ourselves out in a strange country, a desert of cornfields."

" Never mind, Pepito," said Ester Harding, " you will not be sorry. You wished to go to Saratoga, which is hot and stupid. I persuade you to go to a cool place by the sea, is it not so, Don Roberto?—" she turned to the tall gentleman, who bowed and smiled—" where there are beautiful young ladies who will dance with you at the casino."

They were all nicely seated in the stage, filling it comfortably, when some one came running out after them. It was the station-master. " Take this along with you," he cried to the driver. " Parcel for Mrs. Sevenbanks."

The whip cracked and they rolled off.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"My sister-in-law is here, it seems," said Mrs. Harding, with an innocent look at the grave young man beside her. He made no reply, but appeared interested in the landscape.

Five minutes had carried them by the sleeping corn and vegetable gardens; five minutes more showed them the earlier and more modest houses; another five brought them to the "Corners," where the post-office was filled with shirt-waist youths awaiting the afternoon mail. And now they drove slowly into the beautiful main avenue leading to the villas, the casino, the hotels, the dunes and the sea.

The hotel proprietor shone with joy. He remembered Mrs. Harding perfectly. She had spent two days there once. Why had she not wired? Perhaps Mrs. Sevenbanks expected them?

"On the contrary," said Mrs. Harding, "we shall surprise each other. I thought she had gone back to town. It was not she, my good Bailey, but your excellent hotel accommodations that drew me hither with my

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

friends : Mr. and Mrs. Severino Gonzalez, Miss Mercedes Gonzalez, Miss Pacifica Gonzalez, Mr. Joseph Gonzalez and Mr. Roberto Vasquez. Also myself. You will please to register all these names, send us to the finest rooms, and soon, oh, very soon thereafter, summon us to a substantial repast. And it must be dinner. Do not mock us with the ambiguous fried potatoes—or, if they must be fried, see that they are French fried. We have appetites.”

“*Que esta diciendo ?*” murmured the elder Gonzalez girl, blushing as her eyes met those of the tall Vasquez.

“Leave it to her,” said young Pepito, in their own tongue. “She is giving him *confites* ; she has talent.”

Then they all disappeared up-stairs in the wake of the proprietor to select their various quarters.

Mrs. Harding did not await the dinner-bell. She made hasty change of toilette and reappeared in the wide drawing-room. The proprietor was attentive to her inquiries and explained that Mrs. Sevenbanks had gone

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

for a long drive, probably to the Shinnecock Hills. She might not return until very late. She was stopping quite alone at the hotel ; her niece had not been with her this season. It had been a good season thus far. He understood the heat in town was extreme. Mrs. Sevenbanks was looking much better than when she had arrived. The poor lady had seemed far from strong. Some one had mentioned to him—he begged pardon for alluding to it—that her niece had married rather unsatisfactorily. He hoped it was mere gossip. Mrs. Harding smiled discreetly. There was some truth in the story, she admitted ; still, all marriages were guesses. Who could predict ? One must always make the best of it. One could always travel—unless one were very poor. The best plan was to travel and avoid scandal.

The Gonzalez girls now came stealing down the stairs and ventured out on the piazza. “We shall no doubt like it,” the elder observed. “There is a beautiful view.”

“The tennis court is of more importance,” said the younger, “as long as mamma makes

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

golf so hard for us, thinking she must accompany us every moment, and getting so tired." She was darker, plainer and less good-tempered than her sister, despite her name, Pacifica. "Provided," she went on, "there are any young men here."

"There is Vasquez," the elder suggested, timidly.

"Vasquez, indeed! Can a marble statue play golf? He knows nothing but books and law."

"Very likely. Otherwise he would never have held such high offices. *Chargé d'affaires*——"

"Of course, *Meches*, you adore him!"

"For heaven's sake, Chica! and I engaged to Gutierrez! What a temper!"

The bell rang in the dining hall with a great resonance, wholesomely cheerful. Foot-steps and voices were heard.

CHAPTER XVII

OVER THE CURAÇOA

Mrs. HARDING had made herself as comfortable as she could in her room. The window shades were lifted and the great green slatted shutters half-drawn, so that one could see the tremendous moon rising late above the dunes. It was a still, sweet night ; the scent of sea and of beach grasses came now and then like a delicate, ministering spirit. The boom of the ocean soothed her. She would have liked to doze, but that might not be, for she was expecting Mrs. Sevenbanks. The proprietor had informed her of that lady's return, and she had sent her card to her with a penciled " hoping for a few moments." She had drawn the red shade lower on the lamp, and just previous to ensconcing herself in one of the two large rocking-chairs, had set on the table a bottle with

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

rich, red, sluggish contents. "A cordial," she had murmured, "for fear that quality may be lacking." Behind the bottle were two tiny glasses.

Would Mrs. Sevenbanks come? She yawned slightly. She would wait another half-hour, then, failing to—but at that instant there came the soft whisper of silken skirts, a delicate knock. "Enter!" she said, springing to her feet.

Mrs. Sevenbanks seemed to catch her breath faintly as she entered. "Ester Harding!" she cried, softly. She withdrew one of her hands from the other lady's clasp and pressed it to her side. She was dazzlingly pale of face, and, clad all in white, seemed wraith-like.

Mrs. Harding for the first time found her almost beautiful. "But you are looking very well," she exclaimed, drawing her nearer the table and pressing her down into the other chair.

"I am better than I was," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, more steadily. "The sea air has given me strength. I was very bad."

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"You were dreadfully pulled down of course," responded Mrs. Harding. She was determined to have the painful part over as soon as possible.

"It was a shock, I know——"

"Don't," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, faintly, again pressing her heart. "Please don't! I cannot endure——"

"But I am not going to say anything," the other persisted, "that is, anything that it would pain you to hear. Wait a bit. Let me pour you out a nutshell full of this curaçoa. It is fabulously good. A drop will stimulate if the heart is weak, as yours is." She filled the tiny glasses and pressed one into her sister-in-law's hand. "Drink," she urged, bravely setting the example.

Mrs. Sevenbanks, with a deep sigh, obeyed. They replaced the glasses on the table.

"That was a present to me," said Mrs. Harding. "I have a commoner kind for ordinary friends. I saved this for you to try."

"You are very kind," replied Mrs. Sevenbanks. The faintest wild rose pink was

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

dawning in her cheeks. She seemed stronger and more capable of interest in her sister-in-law. "You brought a party of friends?" she presently inquired.

"Yes, the Gonzalez family and Mr. Vasquez. They were all very kind to me in Paris. And back in South America Vasquez was greatly attached to—Mr. Sylvester, as well as to my late husband."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Sevenbanks. "To my brother Francis? I should like to meet him—but then——"

"Do not worry. He knows about that unfortunate marriage—he will never allude to it. You see he was once—but that is seven or eight years ago—he was then the first sweetheart of our niece."

"Ester Harding! What are you saying?" And after a pause Mrs. Sevenbanks, clasping her hands hard on her knee and bending forward, repeated, distressfully: "What are you saying?"

"I am saying the truth—no more or less. He is a fine fellow, a distinguished-looking man. You will say so when you see him."

Miss Splvester's Marriage

"I saw two strange gentlemen this evening on the piazza. One was little and dark, the other tall and grave. Could they have been——"

"The little man was Gonzalez, the tall one Vasquez."

"But they—the little man looked a Parisian, and the other——"

"Precisely. Well, my dear sister-in-law, that is the man who should have married our niece."

Mrs. Sevenbanks stared helplessly at the curaoa bottle.

"I grieve to say he did not," went on the other lady presently. "And why? All for a childish jealousy. Some one had told the girl that he was in love with a married woman."

"Impossible!" said Mrs. Sevenbanks, with a start.

"Impossible for *him*, yes. Not impossible perhaps, for some of his countrymen, for you know they are quite as fashionably up to date as some of our dear New Yorkers."

"His face impressed me as noble," said

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Mrs. Sevenbanks, thoughtfully. Then she drew a long breath. "But why," she murmured, "why have you brought these people here, the sight of whom can only remind me? You cannot mean to——"

"What could I mean? No, I thought you had gone back to town. But finding to the contrary, I was rather glad to think that I could present to you a countryman who was not absolutely a savage."

"Ester! Alas that it should be too late! Do not say any more. I have blamed myself enough. I was too uninformed—too prejudiced. If I had not insisted on the Clifford proposal . . . Perhaps you have heard how he married soon after—an impossible person whom he had long known and who can never be received."

Mrs. Harding spoke abruptly: "Have you seen Alma?"

Mrs. Sevenbanks gasped. "How could I? She has not come to me."

"You think she is well and contented?"

"Heaven only knows. I had a letter from Mrs. Dow. Alice had seen her some-

Miss Sylbester's Marriage

where. They had not spoken. She looked well, Alice said."

"It would be like those Dows not to speak. A foolish precaution! That pattern of breeding, that raw-boned paragon of good form, will never find an earl to marry. She has not the money her cousin had—nor the beauty." She cleared her throat of its anger. Then, "I wrote Alma from Paris," she said, "six weeks ago. I asked her to come over there, but I got no answer. I was sure she would answer. Letters pass very quickly, and I was there until a fortnight ago."

"How did you know her address?"

"Why, I used the same old address, in care of your lawyer man."

"You mean her maiden name?"

"We Latins never renounce our fathers' honored names."

"Ah, to be sure," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, more gently. "But it is most likely she had no money."

"Oh, yes, she had," said Mrs. Harding, positively. There was silence for a time,

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

then she inquired, "You are here alone—not even a maid?"

"I feared to bring Nora; she *would* gossip. And Jane is simply worthless away from town. I suppose she must marry James—eventually. There is a neat young chambermaid here who does all I require. It is understood, and the proprietor has no objection to my paying her. I could spare her if you should need——"

Many thanks, but I am well used to waiting on myself. Now you must take just a tiny sip of this—" She refilled the glasses. "It revives you. I was amazed at what a scientific man told me of its properties. You have already some color in your face. If you knew how young it makes you look——"

Mrs. Sevenbanks smiled faintly. "You will have your jest, Ester." But she took the cordial. "It is late," she said, rising; "I must retire. I had such a long drive! We will talk more in the morning. Regrets are the most futile things. Still, if only I had not insisted on the Clifford proposal!" The curaçoa had made her more communi-

Miss Splvester's Marriage

cative. "And now—now there is no remedy—" She reached out and caught the hands of her sister-in-law. "There is no remedy, Ester? I suppose none?" Her eyes searched the other's countenance almost feverishly.

Mrs. Harding shook her head. "How can I tell? One thing, I am unalterably opposed to divorce," she said, with strong emphasis. "It is so much more honorable to travel—so much more in accordance with a lofty character." She followed the other to the door. "I will see you again in the morning. I have another bottle of that cordial, which I am going to give you. It will do you a world of good. Just the two bottles were presented to me, and I have saved the other, knowing you were not strong. Till to-morrow; and remember—" she lowered her voice—"I am unalterably opposed to divorce. Anything else——"

"Good-night," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, floating away like a snow wraith into the dimness of the passage.

CHAPTER XVIII

ALMA LISTENS

ON the night following that on which Alma's anxious aunts had sat speaking of her in that upper chamber of the seaside hotel Alma herself sat alone at her window in Madison avenue. She had been alone in the apartment for over twenty-four hours. Da Veiga, since going out with the fifty dollars in his pocket the previous afternoon, had omitted to return. She felt sure now that he had gone to the Twenty-fourth street house, and that the woman Barbara had kept him there. She had waited patiently all day for some message, never once leaving the building. She hardly knew whether she had eaten anything or not. There were biscuits, cheese and plenty of coffee in the house, but she had not felt hungry. Probably she had

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

eaten and drunk mechanically. It was now approaching ten o'clock, and she began to think it would be well to seek rest. She was worn out, and her thoughts seemed at times to drift uncontrollably, like débris on some high Spring flood. A crisis had come into her life, she knew, and she was powerless to avert it.

Lingering yet a little by the window, she could see distinctly in the white moonlight on the street below the few pedestrians that passed. At last, just as she was about to turn away, she caught sight of a familiar figure turning the corner into the avenue. It was da Veiga, finally returning.

She remained there, watching his approach. He came deliberately, at peace, it seemed, with all the world. She moved slightly back from the window as he crossed to the house entrance, but even as she did so her gaze fell on another figure turning the corner into the avenue—the figure of a woman. It was impossible for her to mistake, in that intense white light, the hesitation, the stealthy half-pause, the redetermination of the

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

woman Barbara ! She was following him home !

To what end ? For what purpose ? Did he suspect ? Was it by some arrangement with him that she followed ? Was he going out to meet her again ? Did he think Alma might have gone away ? Was it an understanding between them to pretend some amicable settlement and separation ? Was it—money ? A thousand fancies framed themselves to distract her in the few seconds of actual time.

She saw the woman linger on the opposite side, then hastily cross over in his tracks. A sudden suffocating terror came on her. To escape from them—night and all—to escape. Her hat—her purse in her bosom—to escape ! The elevator was coming up—she had but seconds. Her hat—she caught it—then she heard his key in the door. Between the drawing-room and its alcove were abundant satin portières that had been drawn back to the utmost during the hot weather. Into the folds of these she crept and stood motionless. She heard da Veiga

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

enter, breathing wearily. "I 'ave walk fast," he said, in English. "No one 'ere? Oh, *mi querida!*" Then, in Spanish, "She has gone, as I expected. Well—she will come back." He retraced his way down the passage to the dining-room, where the gas burned dimly. His next act, she thought, would be to make coffee and drink it. She waited to hear the clatter of the gas range, during which she might pass out and close the door after her without being heard. But she seemed to wait in vain. He was perhaps changing his coat or continuing to seek for her. Still she waited. Suddenly she started at hearing the bell of the apartment door ring quietly, steadily. Could it be——?

She heard him coming from the remote kitchen. "So—she 'as come back," he said. "I did know. Well, *mi queri—*" He had opened the door and stood facing—some one very different. "You!" he cried, with hysterical shrillness. "Why you did come to this 'ouse? Now, so I prove to you there is no woman—in every room I lead you. You make my to kill you yet, if so you think

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

those things, Bébé!" The door closed heavily. The two were in the private passage. And Alma stifled in the heavy satin portières.

"Have you killed *her* yet?" the woman questioned, in a low, sarcastic tone. "No, Rufino da Veiga, the time has come when you must choose. I am tired of your promises and your falsehoods. I am tired of trusting you. The end is going to be right now, or—well, I shall make an end. You need not look scared; I don't mean murder—or suicide. No, nothing of the sort. I mean to—expose you!"

There was an instant of breathless silence, then the sound of a low chuckle. "Oh, Bébé, what foolish woman! 'Ow you can exespose? What I 'ave done? I kill no one—I do no 'arm——"

"No, Rufino, you didn't kill the old Count. But when he died you stole his papers—stole his title—stole the few things he had about him. You may claim he gave them to you, as you were his trusted servant. But all he ever *gave* you, Rufino, was that

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

scar on the face, where he struck you for being too fond of his housekeeper. He had a fiery temper, the old Count. You see, I know everything, Rufino. You didn't think I knew so much? I found a letter and I paid to have it translated. That was easily done. I have the letter still, not where you can ever get it—not in Twenty-fourth street. And I have sent a copy to a man who has a friend who is from South America and is a lawyer. And this lawyer will be in New York in a few days. Then, Rufino, if you have not made an end of this business, you will be exposed. And I—I shall turn you into the street.”

Da Veiga laughed aloud. “You are one foolish woman, Bébé. “You think to scare my. Poor Bébé! Who will believe one crazy woman? I will say, ‘It is because I will not give ’er money.’ The judge will say, ‘She is one blackmailer.’ Eh, Bébé?”

“The rich family of your heiress will not say so. Just one word to them and they will do all the rest. Just one word only I need to say. I tell them that the man



"I kill no one—I do no 'arm.'"

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

who played the Count Geraldina, the millionaire concessionary, is an impostor. The real Count is dead. I say to them, 'The man you know, the tall, fine-looking man, the bronzed general, the refugee, the revolutionist, was only an employé of the late Count. He was the late Count's courier and—*valet!*'"

There was the sound of husky, hard breathing. Was the heart excitement purely her own, Alma wondered, or did she hear the labored respirations of the two strange beings in the passage?

"Vare well, Bébé," said da Veiga, presently, in a resigned way. "I see you are one *diablo*. What you will 'ave I do? I go back with you to Twenty-fourth street. I get my 'at and coat. I leave the gas turned low. I go with you."

CHAPTER XIX

HOME AGAIN

WHEN Alma was blocks away from the house she regretted that she had not taken a small handbag. She feared no hotel would admit her at that hour. She was well aware that night clerks suspected all unattended women of suicidal intentions. She had no idea what she was going to do for shelter. She must get away from that terrible apartment before she could think or determine. Walking aimlessly for nearly an hour, all at once she discovered herself within a square of her old home, the town house of her aunt, Mrs. Sevenbanks. She remembered there were always a couple of servants there throughout the Summer. It was nearly midnight, but owing to the sultry heat the housekeeper or the butler might be awake.

Miss Spivester's Marriage

They could offer no objection to her remaining for the night. At all events, she would make the attempt. The idea came like a ray of crystal clearness through the darkness of all other thoughts.

She succeeded in wakening them even more easily than she had anticipated. The housekeeper came to the area door dressed and actually smiling. There was no surprise in her manner. "Oh, it is you, Miss Alma."

"Yes, it is I, Josephine. You did not expect me at this hour?"

The answer came in somewhat startling form: "The telegram was not so clear, miss; it didn't say whether to-day or to-morrow. It only said: 'Prepare rooms at once for Mrs. Harding.' We thought best to wait up till twelve."

For the briefest instant Alma stood motionless. Then, "I find it a little dim here," she said, slowly; "the moonlight dazzles." She followed the woman in. "It was wise to wait up, Josephine," she said, recovering herself after a few seconds. "And

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

at what time did you receive the despatch?"

"It was about noon, miss. You will find it in the dressing-room. We prepared the chamber that Mrs. Harding always occupies."

"That was right. The dressing-room with the little bed will do for me. Mrs. Harding may not arrive until morning. I will go up at once, Josephine. The lights are on in the hall, I suppose."

"The electric, yes, miss. Shall I go with you?"

"You may, please, and—get me the telegram." She said to herself if this were all a dream she would waken when she came to reach for the yellow form. But no wakening came. The telegram was dated at the Beach that very morning. "Prepare rooms at once for Mrs. Harding," it said, and the signature was "L. S. Sevenbanks," exactly as her Aunt Louise was in the habit of signing when writing or wiring to her servants.

The housekeeper lingered a little.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Miss

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Alma," she ventured. "Can I do anything for you? Would you desire a bath prepared?"

"Thank you, Josephine, I require nothing. I am going to bed at once. The little bed in the dressing-room—I am tired—I shall want coffee rather early—before nine, I think. I will ring for you to send it up. I suppose James is still here? Yes? Good-night, Josephine."

"Good-night, Miss Alma."

Alma was alone in her old home.

She sat down on the divan at the foot of the great carved bed in the larger room. "Aunt Ester coming here to-morrow! Aunt Ester not in Paris, but at the Beach—and her letter only two days in my hands! What can I say to her? What will she say to me?" All at once she sprang up and locked herself in, then began to undress with a sort of frenzied haste. She would get into bed before anything should happen to alter matters. With her reëntry into this conventional and stately home she felt herself suddenly restored to the conventional

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

mental condition of her girlhood days—a helpless, ultra-womanly condition. Up to the moment of entering she could have walked the streets till morning, gone about fearless and uncaring. Now she felt that rather than step from the house to the pavement she would seek means of suicide. There was as much terror and horror for her at the thought of being out unprotected in the night as she would have felt in the months of early Spring, before she ever saw da Veiga. If they should ask her to leave, or coldly thrust her out, she would fall dying on the stones of the sidewalk, it seemed to her. Surely they would not molest her if they found she had retired. With these wild and foolish forebodings she cowered under the linen sheet and straightway fell into the deep oblivion of exhaustion.

She knew nothing more till roused by a loud knocking. She sat up in bed and looked round her uncomprehendingly. It was another day. She was there, it was no dream. A familiar voice was calling her name :

Miss Splvester's Marriage

"Alma, open quickly! It is I—" the voice of her Aunt Ester.

"Yes," she was able to make husky answer, as she slipped from the bed and stood a moment on the Persian rug. Her glance fell on a bath robe folded neatly on a chair. She caught it up, wrapped it about her and opened the door.

Mrs. Harding reached out and embraced her lightly. "So glad, my dear! You got here first, it seems." She pushed her gently back into the room, and turning, spoke to the housekeeper in the hall. "Josephine, do me the kind favor to go down and personally superintend the making of that coffee, else it will be too weak. You always know just what I want. In ten or fifteen minutes will be soon enough. Thank you, Josephine, that is all." She closed the door behind her. "Heaven be praised, my child," she said.

Alma had receded to the bed. Her lips moved, but her throat was constricted. Ester Harding watched her with sympathetic eyes. "There," she said, "don't look

Miss Splvester's Marriage

so white ; all will come right. It was to find you I came. I thought it would be harder."

Alma sank on the bed. "To find me?" The words came unsteadily. "Aunt Ester, I am lost. You—you do not know. He—he is an impostor. He is no count—he was only—the Count's—valet!" She fell to shaking like one with a chill.

Ester Harding breathed deeply. Then, "Heaven again be praised!" she cried. "I find my task half-done—I do not have to break the news to *you*."

"You don't understand—you don't know, Aunt Ester——"

"I know all. It is why I am here. I came from Paris. I wrote you and you did not answer——"

"I got your letter only the day before yesterday."

"As you did not answer I had to come. And it is better so. All will soon come right."

"Aunt Ester, you have not understood me yet. He was not the Count, but——"

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"That is what I had come to tell you, and I must say I did not enjoy the task in prospect. But all this is why I am down at the Beach with a party of six on my hands. Yes, my dear, I had to bring the entire blessed Gonzalez family from Paris. They are down there as my guests. It costs me something, but what of that? I had to bring Severino Gonzalez—he knew the real Count. It was he, besides, who wrote the letter of introduction for the real Count—the letter whose date was altered. Naturally, Severino could not leave his wife behind, nor could she leave her daughters unchaperoned. As for Pepito, he amuses me."

"Pepito?" murmured Alma, still shivering.

"That is young Gonzalez. Why do you tremble so, child? Dress yourself, partly at least. After our good strong coffee you can tell me what you will. Above all, not a word for the servants to catch and repeat; I faithfully promised this to your Aunt Sevenbanks."

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"My Aunt Sevenbanks," murmured Alma, desolately. "She can never forgive me."

"It is herself that she is inclined not to forgive. She considers it entirely her own fault. If you could hear her! She blames herself for having approved the old widower, what was his name? She does not like him so well now. It seems he married some one that he had known a long time. I never before knew that could prove an objection—it seems his wife will not be received on that account. Your aunt was quite shaken. How happy she will be to have you back again!"

"She did not say I had disgraced her?" the girl faltered.

"*Hija!* That is something only people of low extraction are capable of, speaking against their own flesh and blood—particularly their children. Do not insult her with such a thought. But dress yourself. I am going to telegraph for your Aunt Sevenbanks to come at once."

CHAPTER XX

EXPLANATIONS

AFTER sending the telegram they had time to sit talking matters over. For the third time Alma asked her aunt how she had worded the message, and for the third time Ester Harding repeated, patiently: “‘If possible, come up to town at once. Alma is here to remain. All well and serene.’” There were seven extra words, she clearly remembered.

A heavy shower fell in the early afternoon and made the air a little less oppressive. They remained for the most part in the chamber that had been specially opened for the Spanish lady. The drawing-rooms and other suites were of course closed. All the heavy green shades of the windows were down, and they found it dim and restful as the rain began.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Mrs. Harding had not pressed the girl to recite her experiences, and of these Alma spoke but little beyond that part beginning with the appearance of the woman Barbara on the scene. The elder lady seemed at times desirous to avert a tragic aspect. She made her niece describe the woman. "A large, long nose, you say," she commented. "A very large nose, like Cyrano de Bergerac's or just a generous nose, 'the nose of a woman who would always have money in the bank?' Where did I hear that?" She even tried to smile over incidents. "Let us keep as cheerful as we can, my dear," she said. "It may seem dark for a while, but we shall get over it." Now and then she would try to divert with irrelevant remarks: "Strange these New York houses cannot be kept cooler. One does not suffer so indoors in the tropics. If all the draperies could be sent away—that rug in the dressing-room smells hot."

"The Bokhara prayer-rug," said Alma, feebly. "Aunt Louise thought it a bargain at two hundred and fifty dollars."

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"A cold weather bargain. The rain seems to cease. I hope it will be cooler by seven if she comes on the four o'clock train."

Alma moved uneasily in her chair. She seemed nerving herself for something. After a great effort she managed to ask: "Aunt Ester, how much does Aunt Louise know?"

"By this time, probably more than we do. It makes no difference. The main thing is that you are here, safe."

"She will never let me stay here."

"That is nonsense, my dear. In the first place, she knows she was to blame—has acknowledged it to me. Why did she not cable me? No, she waited and wrote. Poor soul, she regrets waiting now. I was in Paris; the Gonzalez family was there. I knew nothing of what you had done when, one day, as was natural, I asked Severino something about the letter he had sent by the Count. He had forgotten about it. 'Strange,' I said, 'very strange.'

"'One forgets a good deal in a year,' he apologized.

"'How in a year?'

Miss Splbester's Marriage

“ ‘Why, the Count is dead more than a year.’

“ ‘The Count is dead?’ I repeated. ‘Did I not leave him in New York, very much alive—very stout and healthy?’

“ ‘Of whom are you talking?’ he asked, bewildered.

“ ‘Of Geraldina, of course.’

“ ‘I tell you he is dead—over a year.’

“ ‘You did not recently send him to me with a letter of introduction?’

“ ‘Why, I did give him a letter some weeks before he died.’

“ ‘Well, he has, then, come to life again. He is over in New York.’

“ ‘You mistake. What sort of a man is this you speak of, *señora*?’

“ ‘A tall, large man—part Indian. If he were not so tanned he would be called fine-looking.’

“ ‘Geraldina was little and crippled from a bullet in the thigh,’ he said.

“ ‘Who, then, presented to me your letter? Who is this man?’ I asked.

“ Severino reflected. ‘It may have been

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

that some one stole the letter after the death of Geraldina.'

"'But who would have access to his effects?'

"'Some friend or dependent, perhaps.'

"Pepito, Severino's son, who sat listening as we talked, spoke up. 'You would like to see a picture of the Count, *señora*? I took one a few weeks before he died, with my large camera. It is in my collection. I will get it.' He was gone not five minutes and came back with his hands full of prints. 'Here,' he said, 'is one of the Count, alone.' I looked and saw a thin-faced, shrunken cripple leaning on a cane. 'And here—' he began to laugh—'here is a snap-shot of the Count when his valet was carrying him aboard the yacht of Mr. Brown, the rich American. And they were together so heavy that the dingey capsized and they fell in the water. Oh, the valet was strong, but——'

"I looked and saw two figures, one carrying the other. 'Who is the large man?' I inquired.

"'Why, the valet,' said Pepito.

Miss Splvester's Marriage

“‘It was he,’ I said to Severino, ‘who brought me the letter of introduction and was presented by me to my sister-in-law, Mrs. Sevenbanks.’

“Severino was silent for some seconds. Then he said, shrugging a little: ‘*Señora*, I am sincerely sorry, but—no Yankee woman is ever long imposed on.’

“Soon after, we received the news of what you had done.”

Alma uttered a groan. “What will become of me? She will never forgive me,” she reiterated.

“She has already forgiven you,” said Ester Harding, “and—if you don’t go on living here, you might travel. It seems to me, in such a case, it is good taste to travel—awhile.”

“I am too poor to travel,” said Alma, “and too—unhappy.” She continued, after an instant, unsteadily: “Besides, there must be some kind of separation.”

“That we shall come to later on. Nothing in too much haste. We shall have good legal advice to adjust your status.”

“I wish,” said the girl suddenly, “I

Miss Splvester's Marriage

could go far away from New York forever—and forget it all.”

“ We shall see.”

“ Aunt Louise did not say what she thought should be done ? ”

“ I gave her no time to consider. I started out by saying, ‘ I am unalterably opposed to divorce.’ ”

“ But, Aunt Ester, you wouldn't leave me tied to that man—an impostor—another woman's husband in the sight of heaven—a valet——? ”

“ My dear, I had to take a stand. We are going to see about it. You must remember several things. First, the ‘ sight of heaven,’ with all due reverence, plays no great part in matrimony. If it did, gracious hosts, what an upset of things ! It is the sight of the *law* that counts. Then, the strict religious principles of your Aunt Sevenbanks, a devout churchwoman. No toleration of divorce. The good bishops and clergy——”

“ The bishops and clergy don't have to live with valets,” cried Alma, wildly.

Miss Splvester's Marriage

"H'sh! I know. Between you and me, they might cultivate a few more scruples about marrying unsuitable couples. But one must take a very moral stand and at the same time endeavor to be diplomatic. Without diplomacy the world would again become chaotic. I remember while we were crossing from Havre to New York I was lying flat on my back in the berth, not sick at all, but wishing to spare myself the grief of seeing the excellent Gonzalez folk suffer. A little rhyme came running through my head that seemed to point a moral and a course. I don't recall the Spanish words, but this is the way it would go in English :

" 'See a little pig sunning in the yard ;
Would you have it come to you, hit it good
and hard.
Would you have it run away, this is of
avail :
Plant your feet and drag it backward by its
curly tail.' "

She paused, but Alma, with her face bowed in her hands, only breathed heavily.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

A slight commotion was audible in the hall or on the landing below. Mrs. Harding went out and spoke over the baluster :

“Josephine, you have received a telegram?”

“Yes, madam. Mrs. Sevenbanks will arrive this evening. We are preparing her apartment.”

CHAPTER XXI

MRS. SEVENBANKS RETURNS

AT the sound of cab wheels grinding up close to the curbstone—Mrs. Sevenbanks had really chosen a cheap little cab to drive her from the ferry—a wave of nervous terror seemed to inundate the entire chamber. Alma sat drowned and speechless; Ester Harding flew to the window, tried to peep out and returned quickly to her chair. One of her small Spanish feet tapped the floor as ceaselessly as if connected with an electric battery. Once she turned her head slightly to see that the maid had not taken away her second bottle of sacred curaoa, which she had promised to Mrs. Sevenbanks and meant presently to bring to good use if necessary.

“I wish I didn’t shake so,” said Alma.

“Oh, nonsense!” said Ester Harding;

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

“ what in the world is there to shake about ? ” And she moved forward in her chair and made a desperate effort to keep her foot still. The door leading to the wide landing was open. They could hear Mrs. Sevenbanks speaking mildly to the housekeeper : “ All are well, I trust. You have ordered dinner for eight o'clock, as usual ? You may take the things out of the bag. No, do not send Jane. I shall not dress for dinner. I am going up to Mrs. Harding.”

Ester Harding rose as her sister-in-law entered. It seemed to her Mrs. Sevenbanks was looking unusually young. The heat of the day had flushed the lady's cheeks. She wore a tailored costume of finest green-gray cloth, as thin of texture as the silken peachblow lining. Her small hat was a marvel of good taste and her fair hair shone pale golden.

“ Can it be she ‘ regenerates ’ it ? ” Ester asked herself. “ She keeps herself slender. The secret of youth is never to get fat under the chin.” And even while thus reflecting she was giving the lady a slight hand-shake

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

and smile. "You must be tired. Do sit down here. As you see, our truant has come home. I am sure we shall all soon be happy again."

Alma, on the other hand, had not been able to rise to greet her aunt. She sat steeped in wretchedness and her head dropped on her breast.

Mrs. Sevenbanks sighed softly but distinctly and sat down. "I am a little tired," she said. "You are looking thin, Alma."

Alma lifted her head. She found she could speak and must speak. She began with some directness: "Aunt Louise, I know that I acted badly toward you, and I am sincerely sorry. I hope you will pardon me. I have been punished enough, and my only desire now is to leave New York—go away where I shall not be any further trouble to you. I know you will always be reminded of my rashness and the mistake I made. Still, if I had married Mr. Clifford I should have made one just as bad, or worse. For even before he spoke to you about proposing to me I knew things about his way

Miss Sylbester's Marriage

of life. I never dared to speak to you about it, for you would have thought it shocking for a young girl to know such things, and you would have been vexed. It was Alice Dow who first told me, and every one considered her so sensible. She told me how Mr. Clifford knew this same woman that he has finally married even before his first marriage, and how he went back to her after each marriage, not always waiting for his wife to die, either—went back to her, as he said, for ‘comfort in disillusionment.’ And how each time she took him back as patiently as she had given him up previously. And besides, how there was a child. Yes, I knew all this from Alice Dow, and how could I think of marrying such a man?” She paused, breathing fast after this flow of words.

“I knew nothing of these stories,” said Mrs. Sevenbanks, with a slight chill of tone. “I am greatly astonished at Miss Dow.” It was the first time she had ever called Alice “Miss Dow.”

Ester Harding now thought it her turn

Miss Splvester's Marriage

to speak. "Well," she said, cheerily, "all's well that is going to end well. I have been saying to Alma that should you approve she might travel for a time."

Mrs. Sevenbanks cleared her throat. "Yes," she agreed, slowly, "I have decided upon this plan. Arrangements will be begun at once for a trip. I must explain to you that not long after you had left the Beach this morning the mail was brought up and Señor Roberto found a communication that brought him quickly to speak with me. Documents had been forwarded to him bearing on this very case, including letters that will have due effect. In the course of our serious and careful conversation he gave me his opinion that Alma should speedily seek legal separation. We then decided that the best course would be to start at once for Dakota, establish a residence there and engage the best counsel."

Ester Harding looked a little astonished. "From whom could he have received the documents?" she asked, doubtfully.

"From an American friend who is also a

Miss Splvester's Marriage

lawyer in this city, and who in sending them was acting in the interest of a person—a woman who makes some claim,” Mrs. Sevenbanks concluded, rather haughtily.

“Bébé,” Alma murmured, faintly. She was wondering who this Señor Roberto might be. One of her Aunt Ester’s South American friends, no doubt. The die was cast, it seemed. She was to go to Dakota.

After a moment Mrs. Sevenbanks continued: “It will be necessary, of course, for one or both of us to accompany Alma. The preparations can be made in a few days. I do not think I shall return to the Beach, though perhaps it may be necessary for you to do so in order to look after your friends.” She smiled faintly. “The young ladies appear devoted to golf, but as near as I can understand, object to their mamma acting as caddy.”

“They may all have to go to Dakota as witnesses,” said Mrs. Harding, taking a cobweb handkerchief from her sleeve and fanning herself with it in a desperate way. “It is getting colossal.”

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"I hardly think it will be necessary. Depositions can be taken. We must endeavor to eliminate all unnecessary features, if you will permit me to say so, my dear Ester."

The Spanish lady reflected in silence. "Why didn't he come up to town with you?" she exclaimed, after a moment.

"To whom do you refer? Señor Roberto? I was about to tell you that he did come up with me. He has gone to his hotel."

"Good! I will send for him to come here after dinner."

"It is some friend of yours, Aunt Ester, this Señor Roberto?" Alma inquired, rousing a little.

"My dear, why of course. I have not had time to mention it. An old friend of ours, whom your dear father knew."

Mrs. Sevenbanks glanced at her sister-in-law in surprise. "Had you not told her?" she asked, speaking with far more mildness than before; "had you not told her of our reliance on Don Vasquez?"

CHAPTER XXII

SEÑOR VASQUEZ

NATURALLY Ester Harding did not carry out her plan of sending for Señor Vasquez after dinner. For one reason, Alma's sudden fainting spell—due entirely, as both elder ladies agreed, to the intense heat—had alarmed them, although on recovering she had insisted on going down to dine with them and had actually taken a few spoonfuls of bouillon. The drawing-rooms, dismantled and swathed in Summer linens, afforded them no place of repose, and they were obliged to return after dinner to the upper stories. Alma continued on up, saying she wished to lie down and rest, while her aunts paused to converse in Mrs. Sevenbanks's boudoir.

Mrs. Sevenbanks sighed as she took a seat

Miss Splvester's Marriage

near the window. "It seems strange to be here at this time," she said. "I have often regretted that I ever let my country house. It was a serious mistake. Yet at the time it seemed foolish to maintain that expensive establishment for one weary old woman like myself and a girl of as simple and democratic tastes as Alma. It seemed especially foolish when those Western people were so anxious to take it at any price." She sighed again. "I might have asked them double the sum. Living is so costly nowadays. Enormous taxes devour one. I would not be sorry to sell this house. There were conditions in the will, but they might be met. I should try to find a modest little home somewhere out on the Riverside Drive."

"You would have to build it," said Ester, practically. "There is nothing there but palaces and apartment hotels. Taxes you would never survive. I wonder what we should do if these single tax lunatics ever got control. In some tropical countries there is no land tax. It is paradise. The poorest peasant tills his own ground and

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

doesn't ask you for alms. Ask Señor Vasquez."

Mrs. Sevenbanks coughed slightly. "Do you think—" she lowered her voice—"it was the mention of his name—you know——"

"That shocked her into fainting? I hope not. Still, you see the 'Don' doesn't go with the surname."

"I dare say I make painful blunders," Mrs. Sevenbanks acquiesced, with meek sarcasm.

"Not at all. But about this trip to Dakota? I wish it were over and the matter settled."

"I thought," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, with sudden recollection, "that you were unalterably opposed to divorce."

"So I am! so I am!" cried Ester, quickly. "Theoretically at least. But if it comes to one's own flesh and blood being linked to a horrid impostor—a valet! Don Roberto broke it to you gently, I know. A valet! it is more than human nature can endure." She rose. "I think, she said, 'I

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

ought to go up and persuade Alma to retire. There is always danger of a low fever following on such mental strain. To-morrow we must consult Vasquez, and whenever you wish I am ready to follow implicitly your instructions and accompany you with the poor girl to the West. Rely on me, Louise, I beg of you. No matter how painful the duty, rely on me to fulfil it."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, calmly. "Then if you are going up to Alma will you kindly ring for Jane for me? The bell is by the door. Thank you again, dear Ester. Good-night, since you must go."

Alma was already in bed, with the cool linen sheet drawn close to her chin. "I am not asleep," she said, as Ester sat down beside her, and after a moment's pause, "Don't let me have to see Vasquez! I couldn't bear it."

"No, of course not. It isn't necessary at all; it is really surprising what a fancy your Aunt Louise has taken to him. I always think what a pity it is that things always happen too late. Well, of course he can be of

Miss Splvester's Marriage

great use to us—as a friend, nothing more. We must let him be a friend ; it is only a fair apology on our part for your ever having misjudged him as you did, thinking him in love with that woman, when it was really Prudencio—surely you remember Don Prudencio, his great friend, with the invalid wife ? The wife died ; so did the superfluous husband ; then Prudencio married the lady.”

“ Don Prudencio,” Alma repeated, huskily. “ Was it really he—not Vasquez ? Well—it can’t matter now. He would never look at me. I shall be only an unfortunate divorced woman, who married a valet.”

Mrs. Harding got up and closed the door softly. “ My dear, there are worse things. This is a republic, remember, where all men are equal. A valet might be as good as any one else, and his wife a good deal better. Anyway,” she continued, rather inconsistently, “ once you are out of it you will be surprised how quickly people forget. Especially if you should marry again. But

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

there is no need for worry. I have an idea we shall start to-morrow or the next day for the West. I hope so, for it must be cooler out there. To-morrow I have to devise a way to get your clothes from that apartment."

"Oh, yes, my clothes," said Alma. "I suppose I shall need them."

"Well, one can't do very well without garments. I see your arms are bare. Didn't Josephine lay out a nightgown for you? I must ring. Surely in a civilized house one can always command a *robe de nuit*."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RECONCILIATION

MRS. HARDING was the first to alight from the closed carriage as it drew up before the station. The town was still enwrapped in sultriness, but Ester was not one to complain of mere atmosphere when more important matters were pressing. They had been busy for the past forty-eight hours. Fortunately there had been less difficulty than she had anticipated in getting Alma's things from the Madison avenue apartment. When the confidential messenger despatched thither to reconnoiter came back with word of the dispossess notice tacked on the door Ester had promptly summoned an expressman and given him orders; then possessed herself of Alma's key and proceeded in person to the spot to pack up whatever she should recognize as her niece's. "The fox is the best

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

messenger," she quoted aloud. She felt now a complacent delight in the belief that she had left no souvenir for the redoubtable da Veiga to exult over. She had been forced to admit to herself that the rascal had excellent taste in furniture and decorations. She had particularly admired the piano stool—a giant iron mushroom with smaller mushrooms at the base, all in the richest mushroom-hued velvet. She had felt a new sympathy for her niece after getting the trunks packed and carted away. What superb audacity, that of the bogus Geraldina!

After Mrs. Harding came Mrs. Sevenbanks, pale and preoccupied, then the girl herself. All were in quiet traveling attire and seemed anxious to escape attention. Mrs. Harding hastily sent the carriage away and followed the others into the waiting-room.

"I see nothing of Jane," said Mrs. Sevenbanks, irritably, as she gazed about.

"Jane is probably weeping good-bye on the butler's shoulder," Mrs. Harding answered.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

"But she had orders to be here with the bags and umbrellas long ahead of us."

"I will leave you and Alma and go through the other rooms. She may be in the New Haven division." And Mrs. Harding disappeared. She returned in a few moments unsuccessful. "I see Vasquez outside, however, getting out of a hansom," she remarked.

Mrs. Sevenbanks sighed faintly. "Ah! he promised to see us off." At this Alma sank down limp and quiet between the iron arm supports of the waiting-room bench, while Mrs. Harding hastened over to the door and met the gentleman coming in. Mrs. Sevenbanks waited patiently, not even putting up her glass, but the girl's keen eyes could see distinctly the face and figure of this friend of days gone by. He had not changed at all; men stay the same, year after year, while women grow old and hideous betimes, she thought. She felt very old and drawn at this moment. She hoped her Aunt Ester would keep him down there at the door. He had the same grave expression of perfect fea-

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

tures, the same way of lifting his hat, the same walk. He was coming toward them just as he had come toward her that last evening—what an age of years ago!—in the tropical sunset, down the long lane that led to the *potrero*. It was at the end of the dry season—the grass was brittle as hay on the *potrero* slopes; so dry and slippery that one could have coasted down hill on a wooden-runnered sled to the crystal brooklet at the base. The scent of orange and lemon trees was heavy. He came in at the gate from the road. It was her father's suburban villa on the hill above the town. She had a white rose in her hair—one of the thousand roses that bloomed perpetually on the great climbing rose tree over the adobe wall before the house. . . .

The voice of her Aunt Sevenbanks recalled her. She came back with a pang to the present. "What can they be discussing?" the elder lady inquired, impatiently, at last, and started toward them.

"There is a mistake," said Mrs. Harding; "Don Roberto tells me we were mis-

Miss Splvester's Marriage

informed, and we have nearly an hour to wait for our train."

Mrs. Sevenbanks was annoyed. "Insufficient time to return home and over-sufficient for remaining in such a place," she commented. Mrs. Harding coincided, but there was no help for it. She undertook to explain to Vasquez how there was a new waiting-room being built that should be magnificent in white and gold. "Which is no great comfort at the present moment," Mrs. Sevenbanks put in, drily.

While speaking they were all unconsciously moving toward Alma. "That accounts, then, for Jane's tardiness," said Mrs. Harding. "The butler knew the time-table better than we." Mrs. Sevenbanks now bethought herself that she would like to find a long-distance telephone and give some instructions to the hotel man at the Beach about her luggage left there. Vasquez wished to be permitted to accompany her to the booth, but she begged him to do her the greater favor of remaining with the others. She would feel more at ease.

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

There was some apprehension in her mind; she hardly could explain what caused it. She wished they were aboard. She floated gently toward the door and vanished. Vasquez stood gazing at Mrs. Harding ; both seemed embarrassed. Could he remain there without saluting the third lady of the party ? Suddenly Ester gave a little cry : " Oh, Louise has forgotten ! I must run after her. Please stay here, Don Roberto. I will come right back." And she, too, was gone. Vasquez took a step forward. There was no other way. Alma, seeing this, rose and put out her hand. She was able to speak composedly. " I have not yet been able to thank you—for all your kindness. My aunt has told me—of your thoughtfulness—" Her voice failed.

" I know that you have been ill," he answered, hastily. " It is better to sit down again, isn't it ? The heat——"

" I think I should rather walk," she replied. " I shall have to sit so much on the long journey."

" It is a long journey," he acquiesced,

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

gravely. They passed down the room. "The last time I saw you," he said, presently—"it must be nearly seven years ago. The evening before you left the villa to return to town, I think."

"Yes. I was recalling it a moment ago, sitting there," said Alma, dully. "I remember it all. We walked in the lane. No doubt you have long since forgotten. . . . I said things. . . . I was under a wrong impression. I misjudged you. You didn't know the reason—you only thought me ill-natured and jealous. I did you a great wrong, it seems. I can only ask you to pardon me now . . . now when I am in trouble—and disgraced—" Her voice broke at last.

"Don't grieve," he said, gently ; "don't grieve. I, too—you cannot believe I had forgotten anything. That last walk—the rose in your hair—the swift sunset and the soft dusk before the stars. . . . When you left me in anger the rose fell out of your hair—I have it yet. Some men—remember." They had reached the end

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

of the waiting-room and had to turn abruptly.

"I see my Aunt Ester coming back. She has found Jane, it seems. Let us go to them."

Thus the reconciliation.

Mrs. Harding had much to say to the maid, whose eyes were quite red. "But, yes, Jane. The idea of crying! Of course, it shows your good heart not to want to leave your old grandmother, but think of the nice journey and all the sights. To-morrow we shall be in Chicago, where there are lakes and things. You can mail all the letters you will have written on the train—to Josephine and Nora and—your grandmother. Then it's only three months, and when you come back—handsome Christmas presents."

Never had Ester Harding been so loquacious with a servant. But Alma and Vasquez stood close to her in silence. Their duet was over. Had they been alone they could not have spoken. There was something between them like a great blur that obscured all things and deadened the soul—

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

something that must be obliterated, wiped away forever.

The moments wore on toward train time. The gateman opened the door and took his place. The guards began to call out the through express for the West. "We could go aboard if only Louise would come," said Mrs. Harding. "She has all the tickets." The three moved uneasily. Time was passing. "Here she comes," cried Ester, suddenly. Mrs. Sevenbanks came hurrying along. Her face was pale with terror.

"He is out there," she gasped to her sister-in-law. "Da Veiga—following us!" All heard her words.

"Quick—the tickets, please!" cried Vasquez, sharply. "Follow me—we must get aboard!"

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE TRAIN

How he succeeded Vasquez afterward never quite remembered. A generous fee enlisted the services of the colored porter, and the three ladies and the maid were speedily concealed in the curtains of their adjoining sections. Vasquez breathed freer when they were out of sight. Their frightened faces had been painful. He conversed with them in low tones for a time, then bade them good-bye. Ester recalled him for an instant ; would he not look carefully about the station to see . . .

He started again. But in the vestibule he found his passage blocked by a large figure. He had studied Pepito Gonzalez's blue prints too well to be mistaken. This was really the bogus Count pursuing them. How had he passed the gates?

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

The two men stood gazing at each other. Then slowly and quietly Vasquez receded. He backed through the passage into the car aisle. Could he warn them? Da Veiga spared him the trouble.

"You did bring with you in this car my wife?" His accusation was so aggressively audible that other passengers arriving or already ensconced turned quickly or thrust out curious heads.

But Vasquez regarded him with unmoved features. "You were speaking to me, sir?" he inquired, indifferently.

"I say you did bring 'ere my wife!" da Veiga insisted, more loudly.

"You mistake, sir. Do me the favor to pass on."

There was silence in the car; every one was listening. As the porter came hurrying through with a belated traveler's bag and a "'Scuse me, sah, jes' wanter set this down," da Veiga appealed furiously to him. "This man 'e 'ave rob my wife!" he shouted.

Vasquez, with his back to the curtains be-

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

hind which Mrs. Harding and Alma, Mrs. Sevenbanks and her maid seemed all to have crept into their berths, made tranquil complaint. "Porter, this person has made a mistake and is annoying my family. Can you, perhaps, find the lady he wants in the other sleeper?"

"We's a-startin' now, sah. Anybody bes' git off if they isn't goin' along, sah. No stop till Sing Sing. Bes' hurry, sah," he admonished the excited new-comer.

The train was moving. They were off. The porter hurried out. As the speed of the train increased the two men rocked a little where they stood. Vasquez did not mind being carried off. He knew he could explain and pay fare to—where did the porter say?—Sing Sing, or further. He wondered if he would better go all the way to Chicago. There were reasons why he would rather not go; other reasons, perhaps stronger, why he should. The possibility of idle gossip in after days should not outweigh the necessity of protecting these frightened women. He was sure he heard

Miss Splvester's Marriage

the maid whimpering, though the others hardly breathed.

The train rumbled on, more dully, through a tunnel. After a little an official of some sort came through—the conductor, Vasquez imagined. This employé he addressed in a tone of reasonable remonstrance. “This man has made a mistake and persists in annoying my family. One of the ladies has been ill; they have all retired.”

“Not is so!” cried da Veiga, hoarsely. “I did see ’er aunt, then I did buy one ticket——”

The conductor lifted his lantern. “Um-m, let me see the ticket. Yours, too, if you please, sir.” He modified his tone somewhat in addressing the gentleman with the family. A slender hand came out from behind the curtains with the necessary slips. It was Ester Harding’s hand with its “duchess” ring of opals and diamonds. The official returned the check to da Veiga. “This is all right to Sing Sing—in another car, not this.” He eyed the peculiar-looking traveler shrewdly. “Foreigner, I pre-

Miss Splvester's Marriage

sume. Well, you pass along ahead and I will look into this matter for you." He turned to Vasquez. "Lady sick? Four, two sections—" He hesitated. But Vasquez was prepared. He had produced a twenty-dollar bill. "I was not going myself," he explained, quietly. "I saw my family aboard and wished to get off. You might with this bill arrange for me. At the first stop I can alight."

"If so 'e did not bring my wife," cried da Veiga, "why she will not put out 'er 'ead till I see? One 'and I see, all diamonds."

The official regarded the bill. "Guess you'd better humor him," he suggested, under his breath. "Seems a little cracked."

Vasquez looked annoyed. "Since you request it." He turned and spoke through the drapery: "Jane, just look out here for a moment."

The curtains parted. A sandy head and a pair of reddened eyelids came into view from the upper berth. The official looked at da Veiga. "Well, is that your wife?" he asked, sharply.

Miss Splvester's Marriage

"No!" came the answer, in a roar of rage.

"Pass right along, then, please. Can't have the passengers disturbed."

"She is there!" da Veiga wailingly insisted.

Vasquez shrugged his shoulders. "How much longer must this go on? We paid for *sleeping* accommodations."

"Certainly, sir. Um-m—lady in lower berth wife's mother?"

"Who else should she be?" He hoped Mrs. Sevenbanks would forgive him. "In the morning," he added, "he can discover for himself."

"That is fair enough," said the official.

Da Veiga suddenly collapsed into meekness. "Vare well, Mr. Conductor. I go with you in that other car." His broad shoulders moved along the aisle. Vasquez drew a long breath. Suddenly he noticed great drops of perspiration on his face and hands. Was it such a warm night, then?

"Don Roberto!" he heard Ester Harding calling him.

"Yes, *señora*," he answered, in Spanish. "He has gone."

Miss Sylbester's Marriage

"But he will return."

"I hope not. If so, I will meet him at the door. At Sing Sing he must get off—before I do."

"At what time will that be?"

"In about an hour—or two, I suppose."

"*Ave Maria!* Who could have foreseen this? Jane put her head out?"

"Very nobly. We must remember Jane."

"Her *mother*, too, eh?"

"For heaven's sake, *señora!* It was unavoidable."

"Was every one listening?"

"Not so particularly. It is true he yelled. You are all comfortable, *señora*, I trust, and I will go out to the other car and see where he is. He agreed to wait till morning, but his ticket is only to Sing Sing."

"Good heavens! Then go quickly, Don Roberto. [^] Heaven protect you!"

CHAPTER XXV

A DESPERATE STRUGGLE

"You are asleep, Alma?"

"No."

"It is very hot up there?"

"I don't mind; but I am thirsty. Will you let me take your wrap to go for a drink?"

"Of course—here. . . . Can you get down? Don't fall. Wait; hadn't you better let me fetch the water?"

"I can go very well." She drew on the gauze-like traveling cloak. Her bare arms looked thin and pallid in the flowing sleeves. "I am all right now," she said; "I had not taken off my shoes, even."

"Hurry back."

"Oh, there's nothing to be afraid of—now." She balanced herself carefully along

Miss Splvester's Marriage

between the section hangings. On she went, to the end of the car. There Vasquez met and stopped her.

"Go back quickly!" he said; but too late. Da Veiga was confronting them.

"Liars of the devil!" was his greeting in Spanish. "Liars of the infernal! You try to ruin a poor foreigner!" Suddenly he changed to English. "I will find that conductor and I will prove to 'im. Then I will make you to be sorry for this trick."

"Silence!" said Vasquez, in his own language. "You will leave this car; you have no right here. The porter will fling you out. And you will hold your tongue and leave this train at Sing Sing, and after that go back to New York. If you do all this, it may be this lady's family will have pity and not send you to prison for bigamy. You hear?"

Da Veiga only laughed. He seemed to feel master of the situation. "If I have one wife there is no bigamy," he said, returning to Spanish. "I have one at first, perhaps, and while she is yet living I marry another.



*“If you do all this, it may be this lady's family will have pity
and not send you to prison for bigamy.”*

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

Then the first one dies and I marry still another—they are all *diablos*. But this last I can do because the second was not my wife by the law. These laws of this country are truly good and wise!”

“Enough of that! I say you must get out of here!”

“And I say I defy you! I make one scandal and I take back my wife that stands beside you. I take ’er back, and if she say one word I take the throat in my two ’ands so, and I choke—you ’ear, I choke——”

Alma gave a gasping cry and reached out and clung to Vasquez. “Roberto, save me!” she exclaimed. She hung to him in terror. He could feel her naked arms cold and smooth as ivory, where the wide sleeves slipped back. “Save me!” she repeated.

He supported her for an instant, then, “Go back to your aunt,” he said; “leave me to settle with him. I *beg* you to go back!”

Their eyes met. Each seemed passionately to implore the other.

“I will,” she murmured, and obeyed.

Miss Splvester's Marriage

"You will return to the other car," said Vasquez, slowly. "I will go with you and you will listen to what I have to say. On behalf of this lady and her family I will make a proposition to you, and you will agree to accept it—if you are wise. They may even allow you a sum of money. At any rate, you will escape the courts and prison. Now lead the way without a moment's waste of time. We shall be in Sing Sing in five minutes, and you get off there."

They were now out on the platform, where the day coach joined the sleeper.

"You think I am a fool," said da Veiga, returning to Spanish. "For money? I need only to go in there and drag that old woman with the blond wig from her berth. That old Mrs. Sevenbanks—she will give money, diamonds—all she has—if I will be quiet and make no scandal. I can get money. It is my *wife* I want. I will have my wife!"

"Your wife is in New York."

"*Mentira!*"

"Your wife is in New York. Go back to

Miss Splvester's Marriage

her and show sense. She likes you ; go back and beg her pardon. And—*hold your tongue !* ”

“ For one million dollars I will not hold my tongue ! ”

“ Then jail for years ! ”

“ I have no fear. You—you are her lover, but she is my wife.”

“ I give you thirty seconds to get back to your seat——”

Da Veiga sprang upon him. Vasquez, though tall, was slight, but he was alert and wiry. They grappled, struggled. Da Veiga had the advantage.

Vasquez felt himself choking, strangling. Then by some chance movement he gained hold of the other's arm—a peculiar hold. Afterward, reading of Jit Jitsu methods, he wondered if he had saved himself unconsciously by one of them. Da Veiga uttered a peculiar cry and fell. He fell backward, seemed not to stop falling until down the steps . . . and the train went on in the darkness.

Vasquez, supporting himself weakly by

Miss Splvester's Marriage

the car door, heard some one inquiring, "What's the matter?" It was the conductor with the lantern.

He had not breath to reply at once. "That fellow—attacked me."

"Who, that foreign fellow?"

"Yes."

"Where is he gone now?"

Vasquez looked toward the outer darkness. "I don't know," he answered, slowly, with a shudder.

CHAPTER XXVI

A FINAL WORD

ON a crisp Midwinter night two ladies well wrapped in furs descended from an automobile before the new waiting-room of the great station. Ester Harding was seeing off an English cousin by marriage, a Harding of agreeable manners, who was going to join a house-party in New England. Ester was very cheerful. "They got it finished at last," she said, "and it's a work of art. I mean this station. Too well I remember a certain hot night last Summer when it wasn't finished and we had to wait in a place around the corner, a Noah's Ark sort of place." She turned to the driver. "You are to remain for me, you know."

"But this is quite a charming arrangement," said the English lady as they entered

Miss Sylvester's Marriage

the great hall. "It seems all marble and electricity."

Ester was looking about for seats. "So it is," she answered, carelessly. "And what a crowd! Trains for everywhere leaving all the time. You have ten minutes yet. By-the-bye, you were saying the Dows would be in your party. I hope you will like them."

"Which means *you* don't."

"I don't know them—no, that's wrong—I mean they don't know me."

But they are friends of Mrs. Sevenbanks?"

"That is true. They will no doubt have much to ask you about Louise. Do not fail to tell them how enthusiastically she set sail for South America. They will not believe it, of course, but tell them just the same. I dare say I shouldn't have believed it myself. But she *was* in good spirits."

"You think she foresees a happy ending of—the romance?"

Ester shrugged lightly. "It was rather a matter of duty. Proper-minded people are

Miss Splvester's Marriage

always happiest when performing their duty, you know Alma was far from well, and it was Louise's duty to take her to a warmer climate. You couldn't expect the girl to be strong after a shock of that kind. . . . Vasquez broke it very gently, of course. Imagine ! he kept the secret and allowed us to continue on all the way to Chicago. You see, when it happened the train was rapidly approaching a town, and aid was sent back at once."

"How dreadful ! And the man was dead ?"

"Absolutely. It *was* dreadful, . . . but somehow, you know, I didn't feel so terribly sorry. What impressed me was the way he handled the matter—I mean Vasquez. No scandal in the papers—positively miraculous, that. As the train came to a stop in the station he hurriedly bade us good-bye and assured us that da Veiga had already got off—*quietly*. Imagine ! *Got off quietly* ! We went on to Chicago and there found a telegram breaking the news to us."

"Fancy !" said the Englishwoman ; "keep-

Miss Splvester's Marriage

ing it out of the papers *was* clever. Isn't it time for me to go aboard? "

" I fear it is, my dear."

" Then *au revoir*, Ester. By-the-bye, did this heroic Vasquez sail with Mrs. Sevenbanks and Alma? "

" Cousin Marian! you surprise me. Certainly not. He is perfectly good form. He waited for the following steamer."

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